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WHERE THE AURORA FLAMES

BY
OTTWELL BINNS

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

1924

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner, Ltd, Frome and London

TO
MY FRIEND
JOHN HARROP WHITE, Esq.

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WHERE THE AURORA FLAMES

CHAPTER I

IN CHINATOWN

NIGHT was falling on the narrow alleys of Chinatown and San Francisco was half hidden in a cold grey fog, drifting in from the Bay, when Clem Hardacre, fresh from the Islands, turned into the lane where stood the "Palace of a Hundred Delights." All the way from the water-side, where a social indulgence in cocktails with the sole quality of strength had made his feet unsteady, sharp eyes, bright with wickedness, had watched him, but he had been unconscious of their attention. Had he by some chance become aware of it, he would have troubled nothing, for his reckless spirit found danger no more than a sauce making the days palatable; and the value that he set on life was so small that to risk it seemed to be the only thing making it worth while.

Maybe it was because they sensed this that the hatchet-men and two-knife Kai-Gingh of lower Chinatown had held their hands, notwithstanding the opportunity of fog and darkness, permitting

him to make the most perilous walk in the city without challenge ; or maybe a kindly Fate watched over him in those evil ways, bringing him unmolested to the restaurant that he sought. Whichever it was, it sufficed, and he was still an insurable life when he ascended the steps of "The Hundred Delights."

As he passed into the long room of the restaurant, where the farthest West became the nearest East, he almost stumbled over a stool of ebony with a marble seat ; but saved himself by clutching at a heavily carved screen. It rocked in his grip ; but he held on, steadying himself and it, looking on the alien scene, and trying hard to remember what had brought him there.

Just in front of him a huge hanging lantern shed a soft light ; and in its radiance his face was clearly limned. It was strong, with a hint of imperiousness in the curve of nose and chin, young, bronzed with tropic suns, but with livid shadows under the steel-blue eyes, and marked with lines the years do not bring, whilst in the brown hair that curled crisply about the lean temples, the soft glow of the great lantern revealed streaks of silver that had no right to be there. In addition it showed him tall, clean-limbed, whilst the set of feet and shoulders, the whole poise of the well-knit frame, as assured of his footing he dropped his hand from the screen, suggested that he had known the training of the barrack square.

About him the great lanterns glowed, silent-footed Chinese waiters moved noiselessly to and

fro, and soft feminine laughter backed by a deeper masculine note mingled with the clatter of plates, the popping of corks and the clash of weird music made by gongs and cymbals and single-stringed violins. But Hardacre's eyes scarcely comprehended the Oriental picturesqueness of the room. They were fixed in a more or less tipsy stare on a yellow dragon adorning a fine silk hanging at the far end of the saloon, the while he strove to recall the purpose of his visit to the "Palace of a Hundred Delights."

The delights were there in abundance, swallow-nest soup, *bêche-de-mer*, shark fins, ducks flattened out and pressed into a tender block; all manner of preserved edible birds and beasts and fish from far China, candied fruits and water-melon rinds and what not, with the choice vintages of France to stimulate the palate or the rice wine of the Celestial Empire for those whose taste was exotic. Some things on the menu were as strange as the music; and nothing in the room, whether the gilded carven screen, the lacquer work and the inlay, or the dwarf trees growing in the Satsuma ware, was as bizarrely beautiful as some of the women with their fine black hair gorgeously coiffured, the vividness of their features heavy with rice powder, their slanting eyes and carmine lips, and small ears ringed with jade or gold.

Clem Hardacre, however, was indifferent to it all. There was nothing in that gilded Oriental room that was new to him; nothing that he had not seen many times before; and at the moment

he was oblivious to everything there except the painted dragon on which his eyes were fixed. That, whilst he stared at it, began to writhe and twist in a most lifelike way, and so interested in its antics did he become that he quite forgot that he was trying to remember something—something that was of importance. He laughed a little to himself at the yellow dragon's strange movements, and then a small hand slid into his own, and a soft melodious voice broke on his ears.

"You look-ee for me, Clem——? Me see you allatime."

Clem Hardacre's eyes left the prancing dragon, and as they fell on the quaint little figure by his side, a light of pleasure chased away the tipsy gravity that had clouded them.

"Why, God bless me! It must have been you, little San, that I came here to l-look for! And—I couldn't remember."

There was a slight slurring of the words as he spoke, due to the kick of the aforesaid cocktails, and the laugh that accompanied them had the slackness induced by alcohol; but the welcome was genuine enough. His words, however, puzzled the little Eurasian and a slight frown came on the flower-like face.

"You not lember? You forgetee me?"

"No, by Jupiter, no! My little pigeon." He laughed again, put a hand to his head, and then added, "My t-trouble is that I can't remember who it is I *am* forgetting. You savvy, little one?"

The little black head was gravely shaken; and

the smooth forehead puckered in a deeper frown.

"Me not savvy! Me savvy you dlunk, Clem."

Clem Hardacre laughed once more at the frankness of this statement. "Up-pon my word, San, I b-believe you're right. Take a look at that yellow beast over there an' tell me—is it dancing l-like a flame?"

"Me no see!" said the girl austere, almost rebukingly. "You come satee alonga me, and eatee. You not dlink."

"Well, that's an idea, my flower. Only f-for heaven's sake take me where I can't see that beastly d-dragon, or I shall be f-forced to rise and shlay it."

The girl laughed melodiously as temple-bells heard afar; and with her arm in his piloted him towards one of the few vacant tables in the room, and as the pair passed them, many of the diners noted the tall Englishman and permitted themselves to smile.

But there was one there who having observed the meeting of these two did not smile. This was a girl seated at a table with two men, and not more than a year older than San Yee herself; with a face of untouched beauty that had the freshness of a wild flower, very different from the waxen bloom of the little Eurasian. Her hair was of a ripe corn-colour, her eyes blue as the deep skies above the Pacific, her mouth fresh as a rose with the dew upon it, and, just as Clem Hardacre's gaze encountered hers, a little flash of scorn leaped

in the blue eyes and the faintest flush of indignation came in the smooth cheeks. The man caught the flash, and for one brief moment it cut like a shaft of sunlight through the alcoholic clouds on his brain. He understood what was in her mind and half-stopped, but the girl turned her eyes from him in contempt and little San Yee divining that something was occurring beyond her understanding propelled him forward.

He yielded to her compulsion, and was piloted to a table, where he came to anchor on a marble-seated walnut chair with his back to the offending dragon ; but with his face towards the two men who were with the girl whose glance of scorn had pricked him like a sword. An obsequious Celestial slid forward, and placed the menu in Hardacre's hand.

"Manners ! John, manners !" said the Englishman, rebukingly, as he himself passed it on to San Yee. "Where were you brought up to forget that the ladies have precedence ?"

San Yee took the menu and began to order for both, not in the pidgin English which is the lingua franca of Chinatown, but in sibilant Chinese. Clem Hardacre did not listen. His eyes turned absently towards the girl whose contempt had pricked him, and then passed idly to the men with whom she was dining. As they did so the vacancy of his gaze was wiped out by a sudden alertness. He looked at the two men again, noted the fourth empty chair at the table, and then smiled. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he pulled out a crumpled

letter, opened it and tried to read. The words, however, slid one into the other, and whilst he was still staring at them, San Yee finished giving her order, and stretched a tiny jewelled hand towards the note. The man, however, did not yield to this familiarity. He drew the paper back.

"No, San. This is private . . . and I have just remembered why I came here ! "

" You no come find-ee me ? "

" I hadn't expected to do so. But you found me, so it is all righ', li'l pigeon."

Even as he spoke his eyes wandered towards the table with the vacant seat and the Eurasian followed his gaze.

" You no wanchee me ? " said San Yee in a voice that showed that she was under no illusions as to her hold upon him.

Clem Hardacre considered the back of the head of the golden-haired girl at the other table before replying. It was a well-poised head, revealing a measure of self-confidence on the part of the owner ; and as he looked from it to the vacant chair by her side, he laughed.

" Now whatever put that idea in your charming top-knot, San Yee ? "

San Yee looked towards the golden-haired girl. " You b'long there allatime, me savvy."

" Then you s-savvy more than you ought, little pigeon. If you're thinking of that girl, I assure you I've never spoken to her in my life."

" O-o-ey ! But you wantee, Clem."

" Not I ! But if I did, I'll swear that girl

w-wouldn't speak to me ; though I believe that chair next to her is mine."

" Her waitee for you ? "

" No ! She's a surprise packet. But one of the men I did come to see."

" You goee away flom me."

" Not I," answered Hardacre with a laugh that was sufficiently loud to reach the other table. " Never desert a friend."

" Me your fliend, o-o-ey ! " cooed San Yee, very conscious that one of the two men with the golden-haired girl was staring at her companion with amazed eyes. As she spoke the waiter appeared and set two apéritifs on the table, which differed materially in colour.

" What's this, San Yee ? " asked Hardacre. " Thought I was not to drink."

" You dlink that all-light. Bime-ly him do you muchee good."

" I'll take your word for it, San," laughed the man and drained the glass on the instant. As he set it down he encountered the surprised eyes of the man at the other table, and waved a greeting. The man to whom he signalled turned abruptly to his companion.

" Better not wait any longer, Mr. Carlowe," he said.

His companion, a square-jawed man with hard eyes, asked with a snap : " Why ? Think he won't come ? "

" He's here already—but not alone ; and for the moment he is hopeless."

"Hopeless? Why?"

"Because—oh well, judge for yourself. There's the man at the table on the left with that girl in——"

"Um! That's Hardacre, is it? And he deliberately keeps me waiting all this time!"

"I should say he's only just discovered us. But he'd keep the devil waiting if the mood was on him, so you've no cause to complain."

The golden-haired girl intervened. "I saw him come in the room. He nearly fell. I think that he is drunk, Mr. Sandilands."

"No, not drunk," said Sandilands with an abrupt laugh. "A little under the weather perhaps, but no more. No man ever saw Clem Hardacre honestly drunk."

"And he's the fellow for me, you think, Sandilands?"

"He's a perfect tool. Knows the North as well as you know 'Frisco. He's as wise as Solomon when he wants, as reckless as any pirate who ever raided a shell-bank, and as bitter as aloes towards the Mounted Police——"

"Why?" snapped Carlowe.

"Because they drummed him out or something very like it!"

"Why again?"

"Don't know exactly. There was a story about his allowing an important prisoner to escape through—er—feminine persuasion."

"You mean there was a woman in the case."

"Yes," said Sandilands, with a deprecating glance

towards the golden-haired girl. "If I may say so before Miss Nancy here, the—er—persuasion is reported to have been persuasively beautiful."

"And you believe the story?"

"I do," broke in the girl promptly.

"And I don't," said Mr. Sandilands, signalling to a waiter.

"You don't?" snapped Mr. Carlowe. "Why?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, if you'll excuse me whilst I give the order." For quite an appreciable time he gave his close attention to the ordering of the dinner, whilst Miss Nancy Carlowe looked round casually and saw that the man under discussion was apparently absorbed in laughing conversation with his companion. Her father also considered the object of her attention, measuring him with cold calculating eyes; then as the waiter glided away, Mr. Sandilands spoke again.

"Apparently, in spite of what I told you, you haven't got Hardacre figured out right, Carlowe. You see, he's the finished product of English education, public school, Oxford and all that, you know——"

"Can't say I think much of the product, then," commented Mr. Carlowe.

"Wait! You don't know everything. The man's of gentlemanly stock, younger son and all that, you know, with a couple of thousand dollars or so a year of his own. Seeking an active life and a career. After leaving Oxford he made a bee-line for Regina and enlisted in the Mounted Police. He was so keen that in four years he was a sergeant,

and nearing the tapes for an inspectorship when the thing happened and he was broke—more or less publicly, name in the *Gazette* and all that kind of thing. It is a well-known name, and one of the yellow-journals in London getting hold of the story, printed it ; with the result that his family cut him off too—regular crowd of martinets, I reckon—so that Clem Hardacre was more or less doubly broke.”

“ And since the drumming-out ? ”

“ Well, I guess the iron got his soul, right through. He kicked the snows of Canada from his feet and came down here ; and one day in a water-front saloon a sailor’s crimp passed him the knock-out drop in a cocktail and shanghai’d him on a whaler going south. You know what whalers are——”

“ Yep ! ” broke in Mr. Carlowe.

“ Well, there was a mate on board who was a howling terror, and a skipper who backed him up with an automatic. Before the ship was half-way to the Line, one man had been given to the sharks, and three were in the fo’c’sle maimed, and the rest of the crew except Hardacre cowed and beaten dogs. Clem himself waited his time, and one day when the old man was in his cabin suffering from rye-whisky, the mate began to haze him. Then he set to work and beat up that mate as no mate on a Yankee whaler was ever beaten up before. He just pulped him, and then locked the drunken skipper and the invalid mate in the cabin ; and took the ship into Honolulu, and reported affairs to the authorities. There was a

row, naturally, but the missing hand, and the three fellows in the fo'c'sle weren't to be got over, nor the skipper who by that time was seeing visions, and Hardacre and the crew were allowed to go scot-free, though the owners talked of mutiny on the high seas."

"He had luck!" snorted Carlowe.

"No!—nerve! And he carried the thing through, as he's been carrying things through ever since in the Islands, labour recruiting, pearl-fishing and what not. There are some pretty wild tales of his doings under the Line, hair-raising things that he's been in at, for the man doesn't give a snap for danger, and doesn't seem to value his life at five cents' purchase."

Mr. Carlowe looked again at the man under discussion. His hard eyes considered every line in Hardacre's bronzed and ravaged face, then he said abruptly: "You think he'd go North again?"

"I know he's sick of the Islands," hedged Sandilands.

"And that he could pull through the job I want?"

"No one better—if he can be persuaded!"

"But the drink?"

"That's not his regular beat."

"Well, you know what I'm after. Those confounded Mounted Police——"

"Hardacre will be glad to put it across them! You can bank on that. They broke him—and he's bitter."

Mr. Carlowe jerked his head. "Right! Fetch him over."

A rather comic look of dismay showed on Mr. Sandilands' face, as he glanced at Clem Hardacre, now talking gaily with San Yee.

"You don't know him, Carlowe. He's not a man to be fetched."

"You mean he doesn't know where his interests lie?"

Mr. Sandilands smiled as he glanced towards San Yee. "Apparently he does!"

"Oh shucks! Ask him to step over here when he is through with that Chinese butterfly, and in the meantime Nance and I'll get on with the dinner. Use all your persuasion."

Mr. Sandilands shrugged his shoulders, and rising from his seat, departed to essay what he conceived to be a perfectly hopeless task. Miss Nancy Carlowe watched him with interested eyes; in spite of the contempt induced by his companionship with the little Eurasian, she was interested in the outcome of the interview. Her father watched also. They saw Sandilands reach the other table, witnessed his introduction to San Yee, and watched him as he took a seat beside the man whom he had gone to persuade, and begin to converse with him. The conversation lasted for some time, and not once did Hardacre glance in the direction of Nancy Carlowe and her father. The latter, disgruntled at the Englishman's apparent lack of interest, so far forgot himself as to growl out: "Fellow doesn't give a five-cent dam' for me!"

"Perhaps——"

"Ah!——"

The glance that Mr. Carlowe had been waiting for came at last, a glance that became almost a stare; and as Carlowe met the steel-blue eyes and felt them boring to his soul, he whistled softly.

"Upon my word, Nance, Sandilands is right. That fellow's made of steel. If he can only be persuaded——"

Nancy Carlowe scarcely heard his words. She was watching Clem Hardacre, waiting for what he was sure would come. And it came at last. The steel-blue eyes left her father's face and for a fleeting second rested on her own. She felt herself beginning to flush and was indignant with herself, then the gaze passed, and she saw Hardacre speak to Sandilands. As he did so, San Yee turned abruptly to look at her; and Nance Carlowe had a feminine intuition that he was asking Sandilands about herself. The question was perhaps natural enough, but she felt a little stir of anger to think that it should be asked; and averting her eyes, resolutely gave her attention to the strange viands before her. Then her father ejaculated:

"He's coming back—alone!"

She strove not to appear interested, but for the life of her could not resist a glance towards the table where Hardacre sat. Doing so, she encountered the dark slanting eyes of little San Yee; and a second later saw the latter lean forward and address herself to her companion. Hardacre laughed, flashed a glance across the intervening space and then answered what had obviously been a question. The question had she known it would have

filled her with indignation, for what San Yee, wise in the hearts of two races, had asked was pointed enough.

"You mallee that girl, Clem?"

"Marry! Great Scott, San Whatever——"

"Not now. No! But bime-by, o-o-ey! Me savvy!"

"Well, you savvy more than you've any business to do, little one," answered Hardacre with a laugh. Nevertheless his eyes wandered in the direction of Nancy Carlowe, who was leaning forward listening to Sandilands' report of his mission.

"Says he can't at present leave Miss San Yee, who is his friend——"

"Durn the man," broke in Carlowe in a sudden spate of anger. "Who does he think he's dealing with? I'll not stand such d——d impudence——"

"Steady, Jacob!" interrupted Sandilands warningly. "If that band stops its infernal clashing for a moment he'll hear you and the game will be finished before your hand is played. If you want him——"

"I want him—bad."

"Then you'll wait his time, and when he comes you'll ride him on the snaffle if you're wise."

At that Mr. Jacob P. Carlowe grunted, and to fortify his patience helped himself to iced champagne. The glass was still at his lips when his daughter spoke quietly.

"He is coming now! At least that girl is leaving him, so perhaps he may condescend."

Carlowe set down his glass suddenly, and turned

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his hard eyes in the direction of the man whom he ardently desired to yoke to his will, and who now was standing at the table watching little San Yee as she went down the long room.

CHAPTER II

FIRE !

“**W**ILL he come, Sandilands ? ”
“ The betting’s even. If he wants he will ; if he doesn’t you can whistle.”

All three of them watched Hardacre as he stood there with a rather misty look in his steely eyes ; then when San Yee had disappeared he signalled to the waiter and discharged the bill. A moment later he turned towards the little group of watchers. They waited ; and Nancy Carlowe found herself almost anxious that he should come, albeit she felt angry that he should dare to treat her father so off-handedly. Then Clem Hardacre left his table and began to cross the intervening space. There was still a slight uncertainty in his walk, but the *apéritif* which San Yee had ordered for him had worked wonders, and its effect having been reinforced by that of the food and the black coffee, he was now a much soberer man than when he had stood by the screen wondering why he had come to the “ Palace of a Hundred Delights.” Arriving at the table, he stood whilst Sandilands made the first introduction.

“ Jacob P. Carlowe : Clem Hardacre.”

The two shook hands, and then Carlowe turned to Nancy.

"My daughter: Mr. Hardacre."

Nancy Carlowe bowed frigidly, the thought of San Yee in her mind; and Hardacre bowed in return, a little smile of amusement on his face, as he divined that the girl meant to keep him at arm's length. Miss Carlowe caught that smile, and a flash of anger added to the sparkle of her eyes; then as Hardacre seated himself, she turned nonchalantly away, in the manner of one who had lost interest, though that was far from being the truth. She heard her father say: "Take a drink, Mr. Hardacre."

The suggestion was followed by the clink of a bottle on the glass; and as she remembered how the man had stood tipsily by the carved screen, a little spasm of disgust stirred within her. That way the man would descend into the mud.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Carlowe."

Hardacre's voice broke on the reflection. It drawled a little and there was still just the faintest slurring of some of the words; but, as she realized, it was the voice of a man of gentle ancestry, very different from her father's raucous snap.

Jacob P. Carlowe remembered Sandilands' instruction to ride this wild colt on the snaffle, and replied jocularly: "Oh, I guess I understand. A man must have his amusements——"

"Amusements?" The interruption came like a crack of a pistol. "You are under a misapprehension, Mr. Carlowe. San Yee does not come

in that category. She is one of my worries."

"As how?" asked Carlowe, willing to learn all he could about the man whom he proposed to use.

"Well, I don't know what to do about her," came the answer. "I have know her ever since the fat scoundrel who runs this place bought her from a junk on the Pi-ho river, and smuggled her in here. We have been friends—that's the exact word—and I'd buy her out of this, if I only knew what to do with her."

"Buy her!"

The half-question, half-exclamation came from Nancy Carlowe, who had faced round sharply, a look of wonder on her face.

"Yes!" answered Hardacre gravely. "As one buys faked Chinese curios in the shops in the street. She's a slave as much as any nigger ever was in Virginia; and his lot was heaven compared with hers. The proprietor of this show will sell her to some other scoundrel as soon as she ceases to be of use to him, and she'll end wretchedly, lower down Chinatown, toasting opium in a dive or making Yen-shee pills——"

"What's Yen-shee?" interrupted Carlowe.

"The cleanings of opium pipes. Didn't you know? The chinks make it into pills and smuggle it in San Quentin prison——" He broke off and stared down the lantern-lit room, a look of trouble in his eyes. "The worry is I shouldn't know what to do with little San Yee if I bought her. A man can't drag a child like that across the zones!"

Nancy Carlowe looked at him with a new respect as he sat there for the moment oblivious to his company. Then he laughed harshly, and shrugged his shoulders.

“ ‘Kismet!’ ” he said in double quotation.
“ ‘No one can be more wise than Destiny.’ ”

“ That’s so, I guess! ” commented Jacob P. Carlowe, with only the foggiest notion of what was meant; but with a feeling that it was time to get down to the brass tacks of cold business. “ You couldn’t take her inside the Circle, for instance. She’d freeze in a week.”

“ The Circle! ” As Hardacre echoed the words a sudden fire blazed in the steel-blue eyes; and he threw a swift look of inquiry at the American.

“ Yep! The Circle. I guess that’s the country I’m going to operate in, and they tell me that you know it pretty well.”

“ As well as one here and there,” drawled Hardacre, with an air of indifference, which was denied by the brightness of his eyes.

“ And mebbe you wouldn’t mind going back there? ” said Carlowe tentatively.

Clem Hardacre’s hand slid to the slim stem of the glass that Carlowe had filled for him, and his fingers played with it carelessly so that some of the wine was spilled on the snowy cloth. Then he answered:

“ Maybe I shouldn’t! It would depend! ”

“ On terms? That would be all right. I could offer you a share, though I put up the dollars.”

"Terms!" The word came sharply. "I do not remember mentioning them."

"Nope!" said Carlowe soothingly. "It was I who did that. That's only business; and I don't mind putting my cards on the table. I want you and I'm prepared to pay."

"The nature of the work?" asked Hardacre. "I must know that first or we shall waste time."

"You're asking me to give the show away," said the other objectingly. "Till I know——"

"Cards on the table, I think you said, Mr. Carlowe," cooed Hardacre softly.

The American flashed an inquiring glance at Sandilands, who nodded quickly, but the nod was not quick enough.

"'Trust me, all in all or not at all,'" drawled the Englishman in apt quotation.

Carlowe laughed. "Yep! I guess I'll have to do that. Here goes."

He thrust a hand in his inner pocket and drew out the tracing of a map. Pushing aside his glass he spread the tracing out upon the table facing the Englishman. A corner stuck against Hardacre's yet full glass, and though he knew that it was folly to drink whilst driving a bargain with a hard-faced man like the one before him, the Englishman drained the glass, and set it down out of the way. Then he stared at the map. It was a great triangle of country with its inverted apex at Cordova and the other points resting on the Peel River and the Tanana respectively. The international border was broadly marked, and at certain places

across it on the Canadian side were little red flags indicating posts of the Royal North-West Mounted Police. As his eye fell on them his vision seemed to blur ; and a second later a far-away look came in his eyes as they left the flags and stared down the room.

Carlowe and Sandilands watched him anxiously, wondering what was in his mind. Nancy Carlowe also stared at him curiously, and once looked round thinking that he must have caught sight of San Yee. But Clem Hardacre saw nothing in the room. He was visioning hurrying rivers, dark woods, stark mountains, and long white barrens covered with ten-feet snows. The cheerful glow of camp-fires in bitter wildernesses seemed to be calling him from that hot room of luxury ; and above the crash of the bizarre music, he heard the lament of sled dogs as they bayed in melancholy chorus to the moon, in the immemorial way of their kind. Whilst the three still watched he drew a long breath, his eyes came back from vacancy and rested anew on the tracing.

"What is it ? " he asked abruptly. "Gold ? "

"No ! That's played out—more or less ! "

"Copper then—or coal, though why one should go up the Peel——"

"Copper and coal are off. And it isn't timber or——"

"Then in God's name, what is it ? "

"Fur," was the laconic reply.

"Fur ! " As he echoed the word, Hardacre's eyes revealed the surprise he felt.

"Yep! There's dollars in fur still, more than ever there was, I reckon ; and I'm after them, and want you to build a line of trading-posts inside those lines and——"

"But, man, it will take years!"

"What of it! The first posts in a line running to the Peel can be in operation next winter, and the other lines in the next two years. And that's only the beginning. I mean to cover the country right across to Kotebne and shake up the Russians there."

Hardacre whistled. "You're out for big business."

"Yep! Carving cherry-stones is no job for a man looking for a new line of business, and with dollars to put into it."

He laughed harshly, lifted the bottle from the ice bucket, filled his own glass and that of the Englishman. "Take a drink, Hardacre, and tell me what you think of the scheme. You know the country, and I've only been in it once."

Clem Hardacre drank mechanically, his palate scarcely registering the flavour of the wine, then his eyes went to the map once more.

"What do you want me to tell you?" he asked.

"Can it be done?" snapped Carlowe.

"If the money is forthcoming and the men——"

"Both'll be just where they're wanted."

"Then there'll be no difficulty about the stations."

"An' the fur?"

"Well," said Hardacre quietly. "You have to remember that there are companies already at

work. Across the line the H.B.C. and Revillions and all sorts of unattached traders. You'll be butting against them——"

"Who cares? They're old-fashioned. There must be some way of beating them, of getting the fur?"

"There's one way in which you can always beat the old companies across the boundary," laughed the Englishman.

"What's that?" demanded Carlowe abruptly, but with a flash of triumph in his hard eyes.

Clem Hardacre laughed again as he flipped the empty glass with his finger-nail, making it ring. "That way."

"Champagne——"

"No! Rum, rye whisky, gin, wood alcohol—any dam' poison you like. The natives aren't particular; and the man who takes the risks can get most of the fur."

"The risks? You mean the Mounted Police?"

"Yes!" he laughed, and again it was noticeable that the slackness was creeping back into his laughter, as the champagne wrought to destroy San Yee's good work. "They're dead on fire-water, as I know, for I was a sergeant."

"So I've heard!" said Jacob P. Carlowe in a voice that he meant to be sympathetic. "Treated you rather badly, didn't they?"

The look that came on Hardacre's lean face and the blazing indignation in his eyes left the three who were watching him in no doubt as to his view on that point. But his mouth set hard; and no

words came in answer. Again Carlowe stooped to the ice-bucket, and lifting the bottle, refilled the younger man's glass.

"Take a soother!" he said. "I can guess you must feel sore! If anybody messed up me as that crowd did you, I'd go a long way to get even with them."

"And so would I!" remarked Sandilands.

Hardacre gripped the glass, but did not drink. In spite of the tan of Southern suns his face had a grey look; and the light of his eyes was that of despair.

"Gee! Sandy was right about the iron!" thought Carlowe to himself, whilst aloud he said: "This job I'm offering you will give you a chance to get your own back!"

"Possibly!"

The word came sharply; and for half a minute there was silence. Then Carlowe spoke again.

"You can take a salary if you like or a quarter share."

"To be a d——d whisky-runner!" broke in Hardacre grimly.

"No! To build up a big corporation! We can drop the whisky once we've got the Indians and half-breeds! In any case your job would be to establish and superintend the posts, not to take the stuff in."

"Cut it out—and I'm in!"

Jacob P. Carlowe considered a moment, and there was a look in his eyes that would have warned the younger man if he had seen it, but he was staring

at the tracing on the table, and missed it ; also he missed the look which passed between Carlowe and his friend. He was still looking at the map when the American spoke.

" We'll leave it out at first, and see what can be done. The real point is—will you establish the posts ? It's a man's job, and it's waiting. You'd have to be off in a week. I've a gang waiting to start work, and must get them moving. Will you go ? "

Hardacre's eyes were dreamy as he looked from the map up the room towards the painted dragon. Though he was staring straight at it, no longer did it prance before his eyes. For the moment he was in the grip of something stronger than alcohol, listening to the call of the Wild and finding it all powerful. For so long did he sit absorbed that Carlowe grew impatient and broke harshly on the reverie.

" Is it a go, Hardacre ? "

" Yes ! "

" Then shake ! "

Mechanically the younger man took the offered hand, and when they had shaken, the American laughed. " And now we'll drink to it ! "

He filled his own glass, his daughter's and Sandilands', and was just setting down the bottle, when some one shouted a single word in Chinese. Hardacre was the only one of the party with the slightest understanding of that tongue ; but there was something startling in the quality of it that was unmistakable, and that made Carlowe pause with the bottle still in his hand.

"What the blazes is that?"

"Blazes it is!" said Clem Hardacre as he rose quietly to his feet. "The word was 'fire!' and unless some mad fool is——"

"Fire! Snakes!" jerked in Carlowe. "This dam' place'll go off like a cracker."

Hardacre was still looking round, and the rest of the party were rising to their feet, when a babble of frightened tongues broke out, and the stampede began. The clashing music ceased abruptly and the crash of tables and of broken plates and splintering glass took its place, as the frightened crowd surged towards the curtained outlet. Women screamed in fear, and men babbled curses as the doorway blocked with terrified humanity; and Jacob P. Carlowe himself betrayed fear.

"Jump, Nance! This is a place to quit one time."

"Wait!" said Hardacre, in a voice that rooted the girl where she was. "Be sure there is fire first."

"Be sure—Hell, man! I can smell it. An' there it is crawling up that hanging——"

He pointed to the dragon which had troubled Hardacre an hour before. A little tongue of flame was climbing up it; and from somewhere behind there came a sudden crackle of burning wood. Carlowe gripped his daughter's arm and joined the stream of fugitives, whilst Sandilands ran with him. Hardacre stood where he was for a moment, a grim look on his face. From the depths of the building, from rooms and dope parlours to which

the majority of the clientele of the restaurant never penetrated, poured a scared cosmopolitan crowd all making for the main exit; where already people were being trampled by others in the madness of fear. He watched them hurrying by, then he caught sight of the face he was looking for—that of little San Yee, now whiter than the rice-powder which lay so thick upon it, though still the painted lips were like a scarlet flower.

“Clem! Clem!” she cried as her eyes met his, and ran to him like the child she was.

“Steady, little one,” he said. “Keep cool. We’ll pull out of this yet.”

A gust of smoke rolled in the room, orange-coloured flames darting through it; and as they joined the fugitives, moving slowly towards the exit, where men were still struggling and women shrieking, Clem Hardacre found himself speculating as to the chances of winning clear. He thought they were decidedly small, for in five minutes the place with its hangings and matting and marquetting would be a blazing inferno. He looked ahead, and saw that some of the men were making a diversion, breaking through a jalousie which gave on to a balcony. A new surge of fugitives followed them, hiding those who were making the effort, but not before he had caught sight of Jacob Carlowe in the forefront.

In the same moment he saw something else which stirred him to sudden wrath. Away from the two main streams of fugitives, white-faced and half fainting, leaning against a table pulling the rings

from her fingers whilst a sleek Celestial menaced her with a knife, was Nancy Carlowe. In the instant he divined what had happened. Her father and Sandilands had left her there whilst they broke a new way out, and the scoundrel with the knife had seized the opportunity to rob her. With a shout of rage Hardacre sprang forward, and as he struck, the Chinaman fell sprawling among the trampled ware and glass. But he rolled over like a ball, and almost in the wink of an eye was on his feet again, arm thrown back, the knife gleaming in the lamp-glow. Before Hardacre could move, the weapon flew across the space between them, a flash of deadly light, but as it left the Celestial's hand, San Yee cried out. In the same fraction of a second, she leaped, and collapsed, the knife buried in her chest, and whilst the murderer fled and was lost in the struggling crowd around the door, Hardacre dropped to his knees.

He did not touch the knife. A single glance told him there was no hope for the little Eurasian, but he gathered her in his arms, whilst Nancy Carlowe looked on in pity and horror, momentarily forgetting the terror of the fire.

"San !" he cried. "San Yee !"

She heard him across the void which fast-ebbing life was setting between them ; and the dark eyes opened.

"Cl-e-m !"

The name came in a whisper that ended in a sigh, and the flame of life in her eyes was extinguished suddenly like a candle blown out by a gust of wind.

Hardacre kissed the painted lips, scarlet even in death, then putting her gently down he stood upright. Nancy Carlowe was still leaning against the table, her blue eyes wide with horror, and she was near collapse. He strode towards her, and as she fainted caught her in his arms. Lifting her, he looked first at one exit, then at the other. The crowd was thinnest about the main outlet, and he strode that way.

Seven minutes later he was in the street, with the light of the fire behind playing strange tricks with the fog. In the few minutes that had elapsed since the outbreak it seemed that all Chinatown had heard the news and had flocked to the doomed "Palace of a Hundred Delights." It was almost impossible to move, and yet as Clem Hardacre knew, it was no crowd in which to linger, for somewhere in it was a man who would have his life, if given the opportunity. He began to thrust his way through when some one shouted almost in his ear :

"Hardacre ! Thank God !"

It was Sandilands.

"Where's Carlowe ?" asked the Englishman.

"Somewhere down at the lower side of this mob. We were shoved off that blamed balcony and couldn't get back. Carlowe's raving."

"Better find him and tell him his daughter's safe."

"I will, but——"

"Where does he live ? I'll take the girl there."

"Palace Hotel !" answered Sandilands. "If you can make it——"

Clem Hardacre waited to hear no more. Turning, he began to thrust his way through the crowd, making a slanting course up the alley. In five minutes he was through the thick of it, and in another five he had left Chinatown behind him, and was standing at the corner of a street, when a prowling automobile glided into sight out of the fog. He signalled it ; and as the driver stopped, staring curiously at his burden, he moved towards it.

"Take us to the Palace Hotel," he said, and opening the door for himself, stepped in, and laid the unconscious girl upon the seat.

The automobile gave a jerk, and slid forward. There was no light in the vehicle, but he could just make out Nancy Carlowe's face like a pale flower in the darkness ; and presently he heard her sigh and felt her move.

"Better keep still," he said, laying a hand upon her arm. "You are quite safe ; and we shall be at the hotel in a couple of minutes more."

"My . . . my father ? " she stammered.

"All right ! He'll follow as soon as Sandilands can tell him you are safe."

"You are sure ? "

"Quite sure ! " he answered.

She sank back in her corner and covered her face with her hands, and she did not speak again until they reached the hotel. Then in the privacy of her father's suite she turned and looked at him, a strange light in her blue eyes.

"That girl . . ." she began and broke off.

"Yes ? " he asked,

"You kissed her . . . because she was dead?"

"No," he answered stonily. "Because she died for me. She deserved that much gratitude."

"Oh, I am not blaming you," said Nancy Carlowe hastily, and he knew that her contempt of him was dead. "But for me . . . if you had not come to my help, I mean, she would not have died, would she?"

"Possibly not!"

"You waited for her when we moved on?"

"Yes! I wanted to see her safe."

"And now she is dead!"

"It is better so for little San Yee."

"Better?"

"Yes! A dead butterfly does not feel the flame, but a live one——" He broke off. "There were fires for San Yee living that you cannot dream of."

Perhaps even in her innocence of the scorching flames of Chinatown she understood more than he gave her credit for, since she suddenly covered her face with her hands. When she looked up, her blue eyes were bright with tears.

"You . . . you . . . loved San Yee?" she asked.

"As one loves a child. We were friends, as I explained. I have worried over her; and now——"

"Yes!" she said, "I understand. I . . . I thought badly of you when I saw you walk down the room with her arm in yours. I was wrong . . . and I should like to apologize . . ."

"To San Yee?"

“ No ! To you.”

“ There is no need ! ” he said hastily, the blood surging in his bronzed cheek. “ I assure you, Miss Carlowe——”

He got no further. Voices sounded outside the door, which a second later was thrown open, revealing Jacob P. Carlowe and Sandilands on the threshold.

“ Here they are, by—— ! ” cried Carlowe as he strode in. “ Hardacre, I’m your debtor for life ! And you’re my partner now for keeps ! ”

CHAPTER III

ACROSS THE BOUNDARY

IT was seven months later, when down a little-used tributary of the Porcupine crept a big wood-fired launch, towing a laden scow. The launch and the scow between them carried seven men, one of whom and leader of the expedition was Clem Hardacre, lean and bronzed and in the pink of condition after months of wilderness travel. By his side was an old acquaintance, Jean Ladronne, a scow-man wise in the navigation of the northern rivers, and as they moved slowly against the swift current, the pair watched the gradually narrowing waterway with alert eyes. There was much need of such watchfulness. Caving banks had thrown their trees into the stream, and snags and "sweepers"—trees still anchored by their roots but lying in the river—demanded careful steering, whilst an occasional shoal offered difficulties that were not light.

"How mooch of dis fool river yet?" inquired Jean after one of these difficulties had been successfully negotiated.

"Don't know!" answered Hardacre with a laugh. "By the look of the map there are two

hundred miles of navigable water ; and we're going on till we pass the boundary."

"Eet ees what you call a beeg enterprise, dis plan of de boss."

"Yes!" agreed the Englishman. "To cover the Northern fur country with posts and to butt in against the old-timers is no little thing. And so far we have done very well. Four posts built in seven months, and a fifth to be put up before winter, is no small job."

"Dat post on de Vungittee ees a clever move."

"Yes. It will get the fur that usually goes down the Sheenjik."

"Oui ; but why does Meester Carlowe cross de border? He ees Yankee and dere is mooch pelts in Alaska."

"Carlowe's got big ideas. Means to run chains of stations north, south, east and west through the fur country. Next summer a bigger development will follow ; and some of the isolated traders will open their eyes."

Jean Ladronne thoughtfully surveyed the woods on the bank ; the leaves were ripening to their fall, and over the forest brooded a great stillness broken only by the rush of the river and the puff of the launch's engine. A shaft of sunlight striking across the tree-tops struck a limestone cliff up river, making it radiant, and it caught his quick dark eyes and held them. Hardacre, expecting a reply and getting none, glanced at him and surprised a look upon his face that made him ask : "What's biting you, Jean?"

The voyageur made an uneasy movement; and then explained. "Ah not understand. We build a post at Vungittee, an' dat ees good. Dere ees no oder post dere, an' eet ees a rich fur country. Den we put a post on a leetle lac dat haf not a name, which ees across de border, an' now we cross de border to Canada once more; but we do not go up de Porcupine past Rampart House into de beeg country up dere, we go south down dis river where no man go. Why? Ah ask you tell me dat, M'sieu' Clem?"

Hardacre laughed. "Can't even guess, Jean! Carlowe had the whole thing marked out when I took hold; and from what I can see there's method in all he does. You wouldn't have us build a post cheek by jowl with the H.B.C. at Rampart, would you?"

"Non!" answered Ladronne promptly. "But we go into a little known country where dere are no white men!"

"What of that? All the better. We'll drain the fur our way. No man cares to travel five hundred miles in the depth of winter, when fifty or a hundred will bring him what he wants."

"Dat ees so!" agreed Jean with a note in his voice that showed he was unconvinced. He was silent a moment, his eyes still on the sunlit cliff, and Hardacre looking at him wondered what was in his mind. Then the Canadian asked abruptly: "You stop at dis place to wheech we go now, Clem?"

"No! I shall take the launch back to St. Michael

and lay her up there for the winter. Then I shall go the round of these posts by dog-train to see that they are working properly."

"Den who you leave up here?" Ladronne waved a brown hand up river as he asked the question.

Clem Hardacre looked towards the scow as he replied: "Pierre Georges there. He's been at the business before, with Revillions, you know, and understands all its ins and outs."

"Black Georges! Tiens!"

Hardacre looked at him sharply, then he asked crisply: "What's wrong with Pierre Georges, Jean?"

"He ees a bad man, comprenez-vous? He was over de line before, an' de mounters dey send heem out."

"They did? There was an odd note in Hardacre's voice as he asked the question, and he looked again at the big, black-visaged man lolling in the scow as he asked a further question, "Why?"

"You ask dat of Pierre Georges; or of de Mounters. Ah not know."

Clem Hardacre considered the matter carefully as the little vessel churned her way upstream. Did Jacob P. Carlowe know that Georges had been conducted to the Canadian frontier by the Mounted Police; if so, why had he taken him on for the important work of trader at a new post? Because of his experience with the French Company, perhaps! But if Georges had been sent out of the Territories—— His thought broke off, and he looked at the man again. He was

almost a giant, but not a prepossessing one, and there was something about him that Hardacre did not like. His eyes were too close and shifty, his manner sly; and he struck the Englishman as the kind of man who would easily go back on a friend in a tight corner.

"Um!" he thought to himself, without saying anything to Jean. "A man to watch? Why did Carlowe send him up here?"

He was still without an answer to the question when ahead in a cleared space on a hillside they saw a bronze monument set in a concrete base. Jean Ladronne stared at it in wonder.

"Tiens!" he cried. "Some man haf died and hees frien's dey haf brought a headstone all de way up to dis place."

Clem Hardacre laughed. "No, Jean. That isn't a grave. It's the international boundary mark. Once we're past that we're in Canada again. The line runs along the 141st longitude; and from the bay of Alaska to the Arctic you'll find these monuments."

Jean stared at the landmark in wonder. "All de way, Clem?"

"All the way. I've seen the last one up at Demarcation Point."

Ladronne turned suddenly and looked at Georges, who now was sitting upright in the scow, looking at the boundary mark. "Pierre he see eet also. An' he know dat eef de Mounters find heem, dey will turn heem back vaire queeck. Eet ees in hees face."

Pierre Georges was certainly scowling, and as the little vessel, panting against the swift current, slid under the hill, Hardacre saw the fellow spit in the direction of the monument.

"Tiens! You see dat, Clem?"

"Yes," answered Hardacre.

"Eet vas a leetle t'ing; a vaire leetle t'ing, but eet ees like de grass in de air, eet show which way de wind ees blowing."

On the whole Hardacre was inclined to agree with him, and again he found himself exercised in mind as to the reason for Carlowe's choice of Georges for a post on Dominion territory. But as he could find no solution to the problem, he ceased to vex himself with it. After all, Carlowe probably had quite good grounds for his selection.

Jean moved away to the other side of the boat and left to himself Clem. Hardacre looked back at the bronze landmark. As he did so a troubled look came in his eyes. He knew that on one side of that monument was inscribed Alaska and on the other side—the side on which he now looked back—Canada. He was now back in the Yukon territory where he had spent four strenuous and happy years which had ended in a disaster the memory of which he had striven to evade in vain. In the three wild years that had elapsed since that soul-racking interview with the assistant-commissioner at Regina, that hour had pursued him relentlessly.

On star-lit beaches of the South, with the great organ note of the Pacific in his ears, it had found

him. In still lagoons with the divers overside raiding forbidden pearl banks, whilst the man aloft kept watch for the lifting smoke of French gunboats, it had thrust itself unexpectedly upon his thought. Even in hours when recruiting for black-labour he had stood on deserted stretches of white sand, knowing that the dark green woods beyond were full of hostile eyes, that bitter memory had more than once surprised him. Neither excitement nor danger nor action had sufficed to lessen the bitterness of the memory, and now it came back in a flood, and in his ears anew rang the fateful words :

“ I am sorry to say I cannot believe you, Hardacre. The evidence is too strong. You have broken your oath of service, and disgraced the force, which most men count it a pride to serve. I am bitterly disappointed in you. Your name was next on the list for promotion, placed there by myself. But you will have to go.”

He had not argued with the assistant-commissioner. He had not pleaded to be allowed to continue in the service. In that hour he had been stunned by the injustice of the decision ; and later he had known that it was useless to attempt to secure its reversal. He had gone out from the office a broken man ; and within three hours had left Regina and the Territories, as he had thought at the time, for good. But now he was back ; and the bitterness in his heart was not lessened by the fact that he was glad to be back once more, moving through the great solitary

woods and the silent mountains of the North, with the snap of its wind in his face, instead of drifting on languorous seas, idling under the palms of tropic beaches.

A turn in the river hid the boundary-mark from view ; but still his eyes stared into vacancy, seeing neither the dark woods on the river's bank, nor the tall hills with their fringes of ragged pines below the snow-line. His vision changed, and instead of the stern-visaged affair in the little office at Regina, he saw a girl standing with bright tears in her blue eyes, whilst she made him an apology for the wrong that she had done him in her thought. He had killed the contempt that Nancy Carlowe had felt for him ; turned it into something like respect ; would he ever be able to do that with the contempt that men who had known him well now entertained for him ? He did not know. The question had never occurred to him before. In the three wild years that lay between the hour of his disgrace and the present his one endeavour had been to forget, but now the opportunity was accorded to re-construct his life ; on other lines, it was true ; but on lines that might be altogether worthy. To build up a great trading corporation in the wild places of the earth after all was work for a man, and—— An echo of Carlowe's raucous voice sounded in his ears. " This job I'm offering you will give you a chance to get your own back."

He knew very well what the American had meant by that. He was to break the law which once

he had represented ; to out-manœuvre the Mounted Police, to be an officer of which had once been his pride ; and to sow destruction amongst those native tribes which it had been his duty to protect. But he had refused that means of evening-up things with his old comrades. The whisky as a means of securing business had quite definitely been cut out. Not once in the discussions that had followed had Jacob P. Carlowe referred to it. But was Carlowe to be trusted in the matter ? The suggestion, following his own words about the potentiality of alcohol as a means of barter, had been a feeler. Would Carlowe have regard to his scruples in the matter once the posts were established ?

He looked towards the trailing scow and saw Pierre Georges in the act of lighting his pipe, and quite suddenly he divined a possible explanation for the deportee's selection for the post which they were journeying to establish. As it occurred to him, he laughed grimly to himself.

"If that's the game," he whispered, "I sit in. But Carlowe would never dare !"

His sharp eyes raked the scow from stem to stern. There was no whisky there he knew ; for every package piled there had passed his own supervision. For the present there was no need to worry, and—— A shout from Jean Ladronne broke on his thoughts ; and he looked round to see the Canadian pointing excitedly ahead, to a point where a faint grey veil of smoke drifted above the tree-tops. A minute later, as the boat crossed

to the farther side of the river to avoid shoaling water, an Indian village came into view, a score of moose-hide tepees standing in an open place between the woods that at no distant date had been swept by fire.

The camp was within four miles of the place marked on Carlowe's map as the spot where the trading-post was to be established ; and the presence of Indians in the district was a good omen for business, and it seemed worth while delaying to get in touch with the tribe. With that in his mind he gave orders to turn the little steamer towards the camp, and whilst that was being done, Jean approached him.

" We talk wid dose Indians ? "

" Yes ! We may as well learn what we can, Jean."

" Good. Ah go ashore wid you, Clem, hey ? "

" Yes ! You may know the dialect, if I don't."

When the vessel was moored to the bank Ladronne and he went ashore. They were received by a very old man who claimed to be the chief of the Indians, whilst a crowd of children and squaws watched their landing with curious eyes. With all the stolid gravity of his race the native listened to Hardacre's explanation of their presence ; and his bleared eyes showed not the slightest interest until they happened to light upon Pierre Georges, standing in the scow, watching the scene with a grin on his dark face. Then the Indian's incredibly wrinkled countenance betrayed a sudden animation and his eyes grew bright and alert,

Looking round to see what had occasioned the change, Hardacre encountered his subordinate's eyes.

"Eet ees all righ', M'sieu' Hardacre. We haf what you call de luck. Ah know old Mikaket dere vairee well. We are ole frien's. We build de post up river an' we do firs'-class."

"Then you had better come and talk to him," said Hardacre. "If we can interest him——"

"No need, m'sieu'. When we haf made de post, ah come down here an' talk. Ah get old Mikaket's pelts so easy as winkin'."

The old chief's interest once aroused, there was no difficulty in getting information. He now answered questions freely. Yes! there were other Indians on the river and in the country was much fur. They took the pelts all the way to the great Company's post on the Porcupine; but if credit was given, they would not go so far. There was a good place for a post up the river. Once a white man had been there for two seasons; but something had happened and the polite had come and taken him away. No! He did not know what it was, the police did strange things which puzzled Mikaket; all he knew was that there had been a fight, and the policeman had taken the trader down the river, and the tribe had seen him no more.

To all that the old man had to say, Hardacre listened carefully; and noted that whenever his aged eyes turned towards Pierre Georges smoking nonchalantly in the scow, the brightness kindled

in them. That fact gave him much food for thought; and when once more they cast loose and resumed the voyage up-river, he mentioned the matter to Jean, who offered a possible explanation.

"Dat Pierre Georges maybe he know dat trader whom de mounter tak' away!"

"Yes! That seems likely."

"And he know dat Mikaket also. Maybe he haf been at dem post which de poleeceman close."

"That's more than possible! But I'm not going to ask him, though I wish I knew."

"You t'ink dat Georges ees a bad mans?" asked Jean, watching his face. "You t'ink maybe because he know dat man whom dey took de mounters send him out?"

"I don't know what to think. That he's been up here before is clear! And I am wondering why he was sent out."

"De boss, maybe he know?"

"Maybe he does!"

That thought, however, brought no consolation; rather it quickened suspicions in his mind, which were intensified when arriving at the elected spot for the post; Black Georges gave it ready approval.

"A vaire good place," he said with a grin. "Twenty miles to de border, an' a straight run for de canoe or de sled-dogs. A man might mak' eet in half a day—on hees head! Oui! de post he weel do—firs'-class!"

Twenty miles to the border! The phrase was

like a flash of illumination in Clem Hardacre's mind. In the years of his service he himself had raced fleeing whisky-runners to the boundary line, and now as he turned and looked down-river a grim look came on his face. It was that contiguity to the border that gave the place its charm in Pierre's eyes ; perhaps in Jacob Carlowe's also ! He laughed harshly at the thought ; and Pierre Georges, misunderstanding the cause of his grim mirth, laughed also.

" De back door ! Eet ees alway de convenience, m'sieu' ! "

And as the comment confirmed Clem Hardacre's thought, he laughed again, and a hard look came into his steel-blue eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE

THE days that followed the arrival at the place selected for the trading-post were days of almost titanic labour. From a level stretch of land upon the high bank of the river, it was necessary to clear the bush and trees, to trim and cut the latter into lengths required for the building, and to burn the debris of the clearing. Within an hour of tying the small steamer to the bank the ring of axes echoed through the great silent woods ; and soon the first tree crashed among the undergrowth. Every man of the party, most of whom were expert woodmen, was engaged in the first necessary task, and stripped to shirt and breeches, Clem Hardacre himself wielded one of the great axes. It was man's work, and a task he loved, calling as it did for strength and skill ; and in the midst of almost herculean labour he forgot for the time the thoughts which troubled him.

But when the day's work was over, and dog-tired the men slept, some rolled in their blankets in the scow, some on beds of balsam ashore, and he himself lay stretched on the locker in the little cabin, they came back to him. Was his suspicion

right? Had Carlowe deliberately called in Black Georges to do what he himself had declined to do, and was he to be made an unconscious tool for debauching the Indians over a wide stretch of territory? He laughed grimly at the irony of the situation. Drawn by the lure of clean and strenuous life in the wide North, he was to be made an instrument for destroying that life in a race that less than most others could withstand the temptation which alcohol represented. Then he laughed again as he thought of another contingency. Jacob P. Carlowe, if that was his scheme, had overlooked one thing that would soon or late put an end to any illegitimate traffic that he contemplated, and that was the activity of the Mounted Police. Whatever happened across the Alaskan border, on the Yukon side any trade in forbidden whisky could have but a comparatively short lease. Soon or late some trooper would stumble on a drunken Indian, or set out to investigate a crime that would be found to have its cause in the maddening poison the illicit traders invariably supplied; and once on the trail, that man or his fellows would follow it until the shebeen of the wilds was found.

In the years of his service he had seen the like many a time. That kind of trade had but two ends—a hurried exodus on the part of the trader, or his arrest and subsequent condemnation to a term of penal servitude at Stony Mountain. Carlowe had forgotten the North-West Mounted and — But had he? They had been in his mind in that first interview at “The Palace of the Hun-

dred Delights," and he then had clearly contemplated the action in which he himself had refused to participate, and now——

His thoughts stopped there, as a sudden increase in the glare through the cabin window made him rise from the locker with a sharp fear in his heart that the forest had taken fire. The fear was a groundless one. A heap of resinous pine piled on one of the fires suddenly kindling accounted for the increased glare; and he threw himself down upon the locker again. But tired though his flesh and bones were, his mind was all alert, and since sleep would not come to him, he left the cabin and went on deck to smoke a pipe in the hope that it might soothe his too active brain.

The scene on which he looked was a strange one. On either side the river stretched the black shadow of the primeval woods. Against the stars, up-river, he could just discern the feathery tops of spruce and pine, and beyond them the shadows of great hills. Nearer at hand, the glare of the fires penetrated the woods a little way, whilst the river gleamed ruddily in the light of them. In the scow he could quite plainly discern the forms of the men sleeping there, and the huddled figures of the tired men on shore were equally visible. Automatically he began to count them.

"One, two, three, four, five, six——"

He broke off in surprise. And counted again. There should be seven, three on the scow and four on shore, Jean Ladronne sleeping with himself on the steamer. But he could not make more

than six, though he counted carefully three times. One of the men was absent, and it was one of the four men who had made their couch on the balsam boughs. Which of them was it ; and what had taken him from the camp ?

Puzzled and interested he set himself to watch ; and concealed in the shadow of the tiny companion-way, he kept a careful outlook on the woods and on the bank above and below the half-made clearing. It would have been easy enough to solve the question of the missing man's identity by stepping ashore and inspecting the sleepers there ; but that way he ran the risk of revealing his own interest in the absent man, and he desired to avoid that, preferring that the man, whoever he was, should betray his identity in ignorance of the fact that his absence had been noticed.

The minutes passed slowly and no sound except the rush of the water and the hiss and crackle of the fires broke the wonderful stillness of the night. Half an hour had passed and he was growing tired of the vigil, when almost at the very point where the ruddy reflection of the fire's glow upon the river faded a canoe shot out from the bank, and in the moment's time that it remained visible he was able to discern that it held two men. A second later the craft was in shadow and quite invisible ; and whilst he asked himself who the two men were, he watched the bank vigilantly. For a time he watched in vain ; then quite unexpectedly, for his eyes were fixed down river, the figure of a man emerged from the woods behind

the half-made clearing. A single glance told him that it was the bulky form of Pierre Georges. He was in no way surprised. He had expected nothing else; and maintaining perfect stillness he watched the French Canadian to see what he would do. The man's actions as they followed were innocent enough. Seating himself upon the vacant balsam bed, he charged and lit a pipe, and sat there smoking and staring at the river placidly absorbed in thought. Once he broke into a rumbling laugh as if something in his reflections amused him; then he fell silent again, and finally knocked the dottle from his pipe, rolled himself in his blanket and lay down to sleep.

Clem Hardacre himself slipped back into the cabin, and gave himself to the barren task of trying to find answers to the questions which were crowding in his mind. Where had Georges been? Whom had he gone to meet in the woods in the dead of night—surreptitiously whilst his fellows slept? And who were the two men in the canoe going down river?

One solution of the questions only came to his mind. Mikaket! But there had been no communication so far as he had seen between the bleary-eyed old chieftain and the Canadian when the steamer had called at the encampment down river! And if it were Mikaket? Why had he sought out Black Georges under cover of night instead of openly by day? He could find no answer to this last question; and puzzled for an explanation he permitted himself to wonder if there

were other people in the neighbourhood known to Pierre Georges and who had occasion to visit him secretly. But scarcely had the possibility occurred to him when he dismissed it. This little-known tributary of the Porcupine was not a Broadway where a man might expect to stumble on acquaintances. It was in a desolate and remote region that perhaps never before had seen so many white men together upon its head-waters; and apart from himself and his companions, it was highly improbable that there was another white man for three or four hundred miles. Mikaket, accompanied by one of his tribesmen, must have been in that canoe, for no one else but the Indians could possibly know of the presence of the party on the river. But had Mikaket or any of his tribe to do with Pierre Georges; and once again why had the latter gone secretly from the camp? He thought for a long time without result; then, finding himself yawning, he stretched himself upon the locker, and with the question still unanswered fell asleep.

He was astir very early next morning; and going down river to the point where he had seen the canoe thrust out from the shadow of the bank, he searched carefully. Presently he found the place where the canoe had grounded, and on the bank above discovered a spot where three bodies had rested, the crushed grass revealing the fact quite plainly. Four or five burnt matches thrown carelessly away were further evidence that Pierre Georges had been to that place, for no Indian in

a district so remote would have been so prodigal in his use of firesticks. Assured now of the fact that the man whose return to camp he had witnessed had certainly kept a tryst with the men who had afterwards gone down-river, he returned to the camp to find breakfast preparing. Georges was frying flap-jacks, and though he must have seen Hardacre coming up the bank from the place of his last night's rendezvous, his manner was utterly nonchalant and indifferent.

"Bonjour, M'sieu' Hardacre! You haf been for a stretch of de legs, or to pursue de appetite!"

"Yes," answered Hardacre, willing that the man should so deceive himself if he chose; and resolved to say nothing of what he had witnessed in the night, unless Georges himself should refer to it.

The Canadian, however, did not do that; and though through the day Hardacre watched him carefully, he saw nothing that led him to believe that Georges had the slightest suspicion that his absence from the camp had been discovered. The man was utterly natural and at ease, and there was nothing in his demeanour to deepen the suspicions with which Hardacre now regarded him.

The toil of the previous day was repeated. Trees were felled and lopped and shaped and a further patch of brushwood cleared. More fires were started on the half-cleared space; and the smoke rolled down-river and athwart the woods in growing clouds. None of the Indians from the camp below

put in an appearance, though Clem Hardacre had more than half expected they would ; and would have been willing to engage a number of them to assist in the heavy work had that been possible. But late in the afternoon a strange thing happened.

Bone-tired, sweating, grimed with smoke and a little overcome by the heat thrown off by the fires, Hardacre took a little spell of rest ; and desiring to find a cooler atmosphere, strolled down the river bank some distance beyond the place of the meeting of the previous night. Then in a quiet place where the sound of his companions' activity reached him but faintly, he threw himself down in the sand of a little bay made by the swirl of the river. It was comparatively cool there close by the water's edge, and the air was wonderfully still ; and he was half dozing when quite suddenly he was startled into utter wakefulness by a curious throbbing in the air.

He looked up river in amazement ; and shook himself to make sure that he was awake and not dreaming. Then he listened intently to assure himself that the throbbing he had heard was not a figment of his imagination or the pulsating of his own heart. A moment later he was convinced that the curious and faint throb had objective reality ; and he listened, head slightly on one side, knowing it for what it was, the throbbing of a distant engine, rather a mere faint pulsation of the air than a sound. Amazement showed on his grimed face as he listened and strove to

locate the direction from which it came. That, however, proved to be impossible owing to the everlasting swirl of the water, and presently the pulsation, very faint at the beginning, died away altogether, leaving the air still once more.

The thing mystified him. His first thought had been that some one had started the engine of his own small river boat, but that had been instantly dismissed; for the throbbing had been too far away for that. But the alternative that there was another engine-driven craft upon the reaches of the desolate river seemed incredible, more incredible than his last night's thought of the possibility of there being other white men upon the river. Yet he was sure that he had made no mistake, that far-away sound had certainly been the throb of an engine receding from the place where he lay.

Mystified beyond measure he stared across the river into the dark recesses of the woods, trying to solve this new problem. He could not believe that of which his ears had informed him. That there was another steamboat on this remote river was incredible. Since leaving St. Michael they had seen but one such craft and that a U.S.A. government boat going down the river, and nowhere since turning into the Porcupine and thence into the tributary waters had they seen any signs whatever that craft other than canoes used the waterway. Yet he had heard a steamer's engine. He was sure of that; and utterly mystified he took his way back to the clearing, hoping that in

spite of the apparent distance the sound had travelled, the explanation might be found in the engine of his own craft.

In that, however, he was disappointed. When he reached the clearing all the men were busy at their work ; and a single glance into the small stoke-hole of the steamer assured him that what he had hoped was impossible, for the fires were dead. Greatly puzzled he sought out Pierre Georges, and began to question him, noting as he did so that there was a watchful look in the man's eyes.

" You have been up here before, Georges, haven't you ? "

" Oui ! " answered the man laconically.

" You were in the district some time, I suppose ? "

" Two years, a'most," replied Georges, the look upon his dark face revealing that he was wondering what was coming.

" Did you ever see a steamboat or launch on this river ? "

" Non ! " answered the man, though for an instant a light of something that might have been understanding gleamed in his sombre eyes.

" You are sure ? " asked Hardacre, who had marked the passing gleam.

" Oui ! " Then the man broke from his laconic manner. " Dere ees a meesion boat, de Pelican, wheech go up an' down de Yukon ; an' Ah haf eet seen upon de Porcupine an' de Tanana ; but Ah never see or hear dat eet come dis way. What mak' you ask, M'sieu' Hardacre ? "

" Well, I could have sworn that just now down

the river I heard the engine of a small steamer or launch."

"But you did not see noding?" asked Georges quickly.

"No! The thing came from far away."

Black Georges grinned. "Maybe you haf de imagination, m'sieu'. Sometime when Ah haf on de river been for a long time, Ah hear de noise of de water when eet ees not dere, an' Ah feel dat Ah am movin' when Ah am standin' so still as de trees. Eet ees de mind dat play strange tricks an' mak' a man feel an' hear t'ings dat are not dere."

"But this was real! I heard it quite distinctly."

Georges grinned again and shrugged his shoulders. "De t'ings dat one imagine, m'sieu', are sometimes more real dan de t'ings dat one see an' touch. Eet is de way of de queeck mind."

There was plainly nothing to be got out of Pierre Georges, though that swiftly passing gleam in his eyes had revealed that possibly he might have offered another explanation had he been so disposed.

"Probably you are right, Pierre!" answered Hardacre carelessly. "The wilderness does play tricks with the senses."

But when Georges had rejoined the gang, he himself sought the little cabin and over a pipe strove to solve the mystery. That the throbbing he had heard was an objective reality he was convinced. Somewhere on the reaches of this little-

known river was another launch or steamer, and that it was not above the clearing the nature of the water convinced him. It was below somewhere; but in their journey up they had passed no such craft, and the inference that followed was that the boat, whatever its mission, had followed in their wake, and that but a few hours behind them, and at some point a mile or two before their own tying-up place had turned back.

He went over his reasoning again, carefully, and he found no weakness in its links. Granted that the sound he had heard had been a real sound, then some other craft had followed them up this lonely waterway and then returned. Why?

The question baffled him, and so piqued was he by the mystery presented, that he was tempted to have the fires of the little steamer kindled and start down river in the hope of elucidating it. Only the reflection that there was no time to waste in what might prove a vain pursuit deterred him from taking that extreme course. With the fall at hand, and winter almost knocking at the doors, it was essential that the task of building should go forward with all speed, and to remove himself and two other men from the work in the endeavour to solve a mystery that might have no bearing at all on his own mission would be mere folly, and though the thing remained in his mind, a little ferment of perplexity, he was forced to leave things where they were.

Meantime the work of clearing went on apace, and at the end of three days the actual work of

building began. The design of the building was very simple. A long trading room, a store room, and a living room at the end; a rough lean-to at one side for lumber, the whole surrounded by a triangular stockade, in the manner of the old H.B.C. posts, which now instead of the stockade have a simple picket fence. The stockade, adding immensely to the task, had been Jacob Carlowe's own idea.

"We'll do the thing in style," he had said. "And it's just plain sense to take precautions when you're going to plant civilization in wild places. If the post looks like a fort it will impress the natives, an' impressions count for a whole lot."

So the store on this remote river, like the others, was built with a stockade, and when it was finished looked very like a block-house, and well capable of resisting a siege—if it had a garrison. But the only garrison it was to have consisted of Pierre Georges and a half-breed who was to remain with him, and as he considered the contingency of any outbreak on the part of the Indians of the district, Hardacre thought to himself that the chances of two men even in this fort-like structure would be small enough. But the possibility of such outbreak was a very remote one, and not worth speculating upon, and when Pierre Georges expressed his satisfaction at the military aspect of the place when completed, Hardacre merely laughed.

"The stockade will keep the wind off in winter, and will be that much service and no more."

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"But eet weel turn a bullet, also, m'sieu', eef de Indians should get mad," answered Pierre with a grin.

"Why should they get mad?" asked Hardacre sharply.

Black Georges laughed and shrugged his great shoulders.

"Who can say, m'sieu'? We haf not yet de prestige of de great company, you comprehend; an' ole Mikaket might suffer de temptation to loot de store. But eef he do den Joe an' me we give heem what you call ginger."

"I hope there'll be no necessity for you to do anything of the kind," answered Hardacre quietly, thinking as he looked round the great woods and the lonely reach of river, that if any such situation did arise the position of the men in the post would be precarious in the extreme. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, and two days later, with the empty scow trailing behind, the little steamer started down river, its small crew and the scowmen shouting boisterous farewells to Pierre Georges and his companion standing on the high bank outside the trading-post.

Jean Ladronne standing by Hardacre's side looked back at the buildings dwarfed by the immensity of the great woods, and then gave a little shudder. "Ah not like to live dere through de winter, M'sieu' Hardacre, but Black Georges he not mind."

"Why wouldn't you care, Jean?"

"Eet ees so voire desolate, m'sieu'!"

"But you have seen worse places on the trail, Jean."

"Oui! But Ah stop in dem one night, maybe two, den Ah move on. But Black Georges he stop in dat one so desolate hole all de winter, an' up here de winter ees seex months long. Ah not like de job."

"But you don't mind the winter-trail, Jean? I want you this winter, and probably we shall pay a call on Georges before the winter's through."

"Ah not mind dat with you, m'sieu'. De trail ees movement an' life; but to squat drough de winter like a fox in a hole. Ah not like dat. Ah should die."

Hardacre, understanding, laughed sympathetically, and looked down-river. "I expect Pierre will have his fill of it before the spring, for by the look of things, it's going to be an early winter."

"Oui! m'sieu'. De trees dey are listening, waitin' for de signal."

Clem Hardacre looked towards the shore, and recognized that the voyageur's description was a not inapt one. A great stillness brooded over the forest, and in places where the serried lines of spruce and fir were broken by other trees, the ripened leaves hung motionless, waiting the silent summons of the frost; though a few, losing their hold on life, were already drifting silently down to be whirled away in the river's current.

"Yes," he answered, "and it won't be more than a day or two before the signal is given."

"Non, m'sieu'! To-night or to-morrow de frost

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come den, pouf, de leaves go, an' winter come marchin' down from de North! Ah haf seen eet so, many times. But we get to Sain' Michel before dat."

"I hope so," said Hardacre with a laugh. "If we got frozen in, it would be no end of a mess."

But that at which he laughed almost befell them. For racing down-river the propeller was smashed on a snag, and it became necessary to put the little steamer into shallow water to ship the spare one that they carried; and it was whilst this awkward task was being done, that Jean came to Hardacre with excitement shining in his usually calm eyes.

"What is it, Jean?"

"Eet ees a fortune, m'sieu'!" answered Jean excitedly.

"A fortune. Have you found gold?"

"No! M'sieu' Clem. But come wid me an' Ah show you."

He led him a little way up-stream to a place where the bank had caved, forming a little, almost land-blocked bay, where the water gleamed in the sunshine opalescently, the rims of the pool having a dark-looking scum.

"What is it, Jean?"

"Oil, m'sieu'!" cried the voyageur triumphantly.

Hardacre looked quickly at the sandy bank and shook his head. "No, Jean. You want shale for oil and——" He broke off sharply as the explanation occurred to him, then stooping quickly gathered some of the scum in the palm

of his hand, and as he conveyed it to his nose, and sniffed, he gave a sudden exclamation.

"Ah!"

"What ees eet, m'sieu'."

"Waste gasoline from one of these new motor-driven boats that——"

"But, m'sieu'——"

"I thought I heard the engine on the second day after our arrival up here. Now I know that I was not mistaken." Jean looked up and down the desolate reach of the river with amazed eyes.

"But, m'sieu', who——"

"I would give a thousand dollars to know," broke in Hardacre, with a very thoughtful look in his eyes. And all the way to St. Michael that look came into his eyes when his mind recalled the mysterious craft which he had heard but not seen, and which had left such indubitable evidence of its presence behind it.

CHAPTER V

AT SAINT MICHAEL

DOWN one of the plank side-walks characteristic of St. Michael, Clem Hardacre walked briskly. A high wind was blowing, there was frost in it, and the weary waste of tundra about the town was beginning to set hard, so that soon it would be possible to take a walk without sinking ankle deep in the wet moss that stretched for miles ; and which in the summer was the breeding ground of myriads of mosquitoes. Seen under the best conditions, when a gleam of sunshine breaks through the soaking summer rains, it is a place to flee from ; but seen under lowering skies with a bitter wind blowing from the Bering, the city of the tundra seems the last word in dreariness and the abomination of desolation. Yet for Clem Hardacre the desolation was banished at a stroke, and the roses of Paradise had bloomed suddenly in the dreariness, when ahead of him in the street he most unexpectedly caught sight of Nancy Carlowe.

She was talking with a young Eskimo woman, whose flat broad face and oblique dark eyes by contrast accentuated the beauty of her own clear-

cut features ; whilst the squat form of the native, clad in a fur parka from which most of the hair had been rubbed off, and with the feet shod in mukluks, threw into relief the dainty lissomness of the girl, to whom she was trying to sell a carved walrus tusk. The Eskimo's guttural eloquence had prevailed over the girl's tender heart, and the tusk was just changing owners, when, happening to look up, she became aware of Clem Hardacre's approach. He saw her eyes light with welcome and the dainty blood flush her cheeks, as he hurried forward.

" You, Miss Carlowe, here ? " he cried.

" You did not expect to see me ? " she answered with a merry laugh at his evident amazement.

" I have been here for three whole weeks."

" I expected to meet your father, but——"

" I came with him. I insisted on doing so. I had never been in Alaska, and since I would not be left behind he had to tote me along."

Hardacre laughed. " I hope you like it now you're here."

The girl made a wry face. " I think St. Michael is the most dismal place I ever saw."

The young man laughed again. " It is not one of the beauty spots of the Continent ; but in summer it boasts more mosquitoes to the square mile than any other place under the sun."

" And that is its chief charm ? Well——" Her laughter was checked by a sudden gust which took her breath ; and when she had recovered, she looked at him with becoming gravity.

"You are going to see my father?" she asked.

"Yes! We made St. Michael an hour ago; and I am on my way to him."

"I also," answered the girl. "And if you like we will go together." She paused, a little confusion showed in her face, and made itself apparent in her manner; then she added hesitatingly, "There . . . there is something I should like to ask you, Mr. Hardacre."

"Ask on," he answered with a laugh.

"It is about . . . about your work. You have built the trading-posts?"

"Five of them," he answered with a man's pride in the achievement; "I should say it was a record in the time."

Nancy Carlowe looked straight ahead up the dreary street, and glancing at her, Hardacre saw that the flush had deepened in her face. That she was a little embarrassed by the question she wished to ask him he was sure; but having not the slightest idea as to its nature he was unable to help her. Then quite suddenly she broke through her reserve and embarrassment, speaking quickly:

"Mr. Hardacre, I want you to tell me if whisky is to be sold at the new trading-posts?"

The question was as unexpected as her own bright presence at St. Michael; and it surprised him almost as much. Before he replied, he flashed a swift glance at her, and saw that her face was grave and anxious, then he answered almost harshly: "No, Miss Carlowe."

A swift change came over the girl's face, the anxiety giving place to relief.

"I am very glad," she answered quietly. "I was afraid that . . . that——"

"That I was going to turn whisky-runner?" he asked laughingly. "You are not very complimentary to me, Miss Carlowe."

"It was because of what was said at 'The Palace of a Hundred Delights,'" she explained apologetically. "I thought that perhaps you might have changed your mind——"

"Not on that," he broke in. "It is the dirtiest trade in all the North, as I have had occasion to know in time past."

"My father——" she began, and then stopped as if uncertain what to say.

"Yes?" he encouraged her.

"He is a business man; and if that would help—I mean the sale of whisky to the Indians—I am afraid he would not be very particular, you know."

She spoke hesitatingly, and watching her face he was able to divine what it cost her to say this about her father.

"It wouldn't help—permanently," he answered quietly. "After a little time there would be trouble with the police, at any rate on the Canadian side of the border, and possibly with the Indians themselves. Your father's idea of big business doesn't fit in with whisky-running, and if it did I shouldn't be on the job."

Nancy Carlowe hesitated, then replied: "I

was hoping you would take that view, and I trust you will be able to convince my father that it is the right one, from a business point of view, I mean."

"He is already convinced. I made it very clear before I set out to build the posts."

"So I understood; but . . . but, well, you must keep in mind that my father may be tempted to . . . er . . . change his views."

He looked at her and saw that she was in earnest, and understood without anything more definite being said that she was giving him a warning. He whistled softly to himself, then he laughed. "Well, I shall not change mine; and as I shall be in charge of the posts there won't be any change in policy whilst they're under my jurisdiction."

Nancy Carlowe did not reply; and for a little time they walked on together; then she asked abruptly: "You were in the Mounted Police at one time, weren't you?"

"Yes!" he answered in a hard voice.

"Why . . . why did you leave? Tell me?"

"Because my seniors asked me to," he replied with a harsh laugh. "I was kicked out."

She stopped on the plank side-walk and looked at him. Her blue eyes were remarkably steady, though there was a high colour in the beautiful face.

"Did you deserve it?" she asked with a directness that appealed to him.

"They thought so," he answered, with another

harsh laugh. "And there was no appeal. I was broken and gazetted as a disgrace to an honourable service."

"I asked you if you deserved it," replied Nancy Carlowe steadily. "Did you?"

"Before God, no!" he answered hoarsely. "I was the victim of circumstances which I dare say justified the action of my superiors."

"It was an injustice that you suffered?"

"Yes! And it bites deep to this day."

"Won't . . . won't you tell me the story?" she asked sympathetically.

"Not to-day," was the reply. "Some day I may, but it is not a pretty story. I have told it to only one person—the Assistant-Commissioner at Regina—and he did not believe me. I have no desire to repeat it until I can offer substantiating evidence. I should not like you to think I was a liar."

Nancy Carlowe smiled and walked on. "I think you need not be afraid of that," she said quietly. "I know when I can believe a man, and . . . and after what I saw in . . . in Chinatown I shall not be censorious again."

He remembered the flicker of contempt that he had seen in the blue eyes when he had passed her with San Yee upon his arm, and he laughed with understanding of her meaning. Then his face grew thoughtful as he was assailed with the temptation to pour his story into sympathetic ears; but he crushed it down.

"Thanks, Miss Carlowe. But for the present I do not tell the story."

"I am disappointed," she answered quietly. "I hoped that you would have given me the confidence of friendship and——"

"Friendship!" he cried, coming to a standstill in the lee of a projecting building that broke the force of the blistering wind. "You offer me that, Miss Carlowe——"

"Yes!" she answered promptly. "If you will not trample it down by . . . by refusing to trust me."

His steel-blue eyes met hers of softer blue as she spoke, and something stirred in his heart to which it had hitherto been a stranger. He had looked in the eyes of many women in the wild years since he had left the North, large languorous eyes that had stirred the swift blood and quickened the heart-beats, but none had moved him as these. He knew it for what it was, the quickening of the love that may make or break a man utterly, and whilst his pulse leaped he felt the hot blood running in his face, then he laughed almost recklessly.

"I could trust you to the world's end," he said, "but I am not sure I want your friendship, Miss Carlowe." His words were like a blow to her. He saw the blood surge in the beautiful face, marked the swift tightening of the firm mouth and the flash of fire in the blue eyes; and his ears were quick to record the hard note in her voice.

"You are not sure, Mr. Hardacre. You refuse——"

"What man would take a small prize, however precious, if he had set his mind on the greater

—the ultimate thing?" he broke in, to correct her misapprehension.

That she understood his meaning was clear; for the blood surged anew in her face, and her eyes softened. "Oh!" she said with a tremulous laugh, "I . . . I did not understand. I—I—" she broke off in confusion, manifestly took a grip upon herself and laughed again. "You move in straight lines, Mr. Hardacre?"

"In straight lines——"

"Yes," she answered again with laughter. "The shortest distance between two given points, you know. I . . . I should not call you a—er—circumnavigator."

"When a man discovers suddenly that he wants——"

"Then he must learn to play patience," she interrupted lightly. "I think we had better move on. It is beginning to rain."

There was a lilt in her voice that saved the light words from becoming a rebuke, and as she moved on, she was smiling, and the blue eyes shone. He noted these things and as he fell into step by her side his heart was light. He had refused friendship, and his audacity already had a measure of reward, though as they continued on their way up the street, her eyes were turned resolutely from him. It did not trouble him that he could not see them, nor was he tempted to test his fortune further. He was content to leave things as they were. But twenty yards up the street he suffered what some men would

have counted a set-back. For out of one of the stores issued a soldier whose hand went to the salute as he saw Miss Carlowe, and then took the one she offered.

"Well met, Miss Nancy," said the soldier, before she could introduce him to Hardacre. "I have just seen the daintiest cribbage-board, finer than that of old Carmady's which you coveted, and which I would have lifted for you if you hadn't discouraged me. I've had it set aside for your approval; and if you've a moment to spare——"

Nancy Carlowe broke in on his rush of words. "Time is not precious at St. Michael," she said with a laugh. "If the cribbage-board is what you say——"

"It is more. The finest piece of native work I ever saw."

"Then I must see it, but first let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Hardacre: Captain Wenslow."

Hardacre's eyes met those of the soldier, and as each made conventional acknowledgments measured him and knew him for a man. Wenslow's eyes returned the compliment; and the sharp questioning glance told Hardacre more than perhaps the soldier realized. The fellow was wondering who he was, in what relationship he stood to Nancy Carlowe; and Hardacre did not need to wonder about him at all. In his soul, he knew. The man was an aspirant, like himself—and perhaps a man to watch. He gave no sign of his understanding however; but looked across the dreary tundra towards Fort

Liscum, and laughed. " You live up there, Captain Wenslow ? "

" Yes."

" Then I do not envy you."

" You reside in a more salubrious spot, perhaps ? " asked the soldier quickly, plainly angling.

Hardacre laughed again and waved a hand. " The Yukon is my wash-pot, and over the Porcupine I cast my shoe."

" This side the border ? "

" This and the other."

" Um ! You travel wide, Mr. Hardacre."

" Naturally, having wide interests." His eyes sought Nancy Carlowe as he spoke ; and surprised a glint of laughter in them ; and before the soldier could reply, she intervened.

" That cribbage-board, Captain Wenslow ! I think——"

" Certainly, Miss Nancy ! "

He saluted Hardacre in farewell, and the girl turned with him and began to retrace her steps down the planked side-walk, Wenslow by her side. Clem Hardacre watched them for a moment, and then laughed. Nancy Carlowe had left him without a word, and the man by her side was plainly on the best of terms with her, but he was not discouraged. If he had to fight for her, she was worth fighting for, and life and love were nothing without battle. He had ventured a great deal and had lost nothing, and——"

His thoughts broke off as he fronted the shrivelling wind ; and humming a quick-step to himself, went

up the street to the office of Jacob Carlowe. He found Carlowe waiting him. The American shook hands with him.

"Glad to see you, Hardacre. You look in top form."

"I am," laughed the younger man.

"Take that chair—there! Have a nip!"

"Thank you—no."

"Um! Cut it out, I suppose?" Carlowe laughed as he asked the question, but as he waited for the answer there was something more than curiosity.

"Yes! For the present—just to break off a habit, you know."

Jacob P. Carlowe laughed again, and pushed a cigar box towards him. "Then have a smoke and we'll talk. You got the posts built?"

"Yes!"

"And in apple-pie order?"

"They were giving credits to the Indians up at Vungittee the day I left; and the others must have done it by now."

"Good! We'll get the fur?"

"Yes—most of it, particularly at Vungittee and the other posts this side. Black River and The Crow are a little more problematical. Across the line we're up against the old companies——"

"No need to worry about them," interrupted Carlowe confidently. "They'll pan out sound ore. Those chaps in charge are the right sort."

"You think so?" Clem Hardacre asked the question deliberately; and as deliberately added,

"I don't like that French-Canadian at Black River!"

"Pierre Georges?" Carlowe's eyes grew very alert, then he laughed, and said with easy assurance: "He's not a beauty; but he has the word for being a first-class trader."

"You know that the Mounted Police once gave him a ticket for the outside?"

"A ticket?"

"'Leave within twenty-four hours!' The way of the Mounted with undesirables."

"Oh! I guess Pierre's learned his lesson then! Anyhow the mounters are not like to trouble Black River much."

Clem Hardacre had his doubts, but did not express them, instead he turned to another topic. "Queer thing happened up there. One day whilst we were cutting logs I heard a launch on the river."

"You—what?" The surprise in Carlowe's face was perfect, but to the other's ears the note of astonishment in the raucous voice sounded flat.

"There was a launch——"

"See it?" snapped the American, an intent look in his eyes.

"No, I heard it."

Carlowe's eyes dulled a little and he laughed.

"Anybody else hear it?"

"No!"

"Sure you weren't dreaming, Hardacre?"

"Quite sure. Coming down the river we had an accident and had to tie up in shallow water.

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There was a quiet eddy, and I found gasoline there."

"Um!" Jacob Carlowe jerked his shoulders. "Looks queer! Do you think you were trailed?"

"I don't know what to think."

Carlowe thrust his feet towards the stove; and said easily, "Well, I guess it don't matter a cent. It's our range; and Black Georges will 'ware off trespassers. There's other things I want to talk to you about." He plunged into business details, and Clem listened; only occasionally putting in a word, until Carlowe said something that made him ask a surprised question.

"You're stopping up here for the winter?"

"Yes! I guess that's it!"

"And . . . and Miss Carlowe, is she——"

"Won't be turned out. Bitten by some blamed romantic notion that she'd like to drive a dog team, so she's stopping up here to freeze."

"I hope not," laughed Hardacre, wondering if the exultation he felt showed in his face.

"It's a durned nuisance," growled the older man. "But she's wilful as a thoroughbred. Guess she'll wish herself outside before Christmas."

He jerked back to business, and when he had finished, and the younger man rose to go, he gave him an invitation.

"Come in and feed with us to-night. It's a one-horse hotel; but we'll do our best."

"Thank you, Carlowe. At seven——"

"Nope, six! They get up early these parts," Hardacre laughed. "I'll be on time,"

Then he made his way into the street. An icy rain was blowing in from the bay ; and without wasting time he made his way to his own hotel. Then he gave himself to thought. Nancy Carlowe's fears had been without foundation. Her father had said nothing about whisky as a means of barter ; and her anxiety puzzled him a little, when he thought of it ; just as did Carlowe's indifference to Pierre Georges' reputation. His brow contracted a little in a perplexed frown. Did the girl know something that made her anxious, or was she just worrying on general principles ? He could not guess ; but as he continued to think of her, his frown lifted, and his eyes lit with the light of dreams.

"Some day," he muttered, "I will tell her and then——" He broke off, and laughed at himself, but when two hours later, he walked through driving snow to Carlowe's hotel, the same thought was in his mind, and when in the private room Nancy Carlowe alone received him the same light was in his eyes. As she held out her hand something in her glance set his heart rioting. He took the hand, turned up the palm swiftly and kissed it. The girl's face grew suddenly rosy ; but before she could protest or even snatch away the hand, the door opened and her father came in.

"Hallo—Hardacre—on time !"

"Yes. Never be late to a feast ; or early at a funeral, you know——"

Carlowe laughed. "Well, the baked meats here

ain't fit for either, as you'll find out before you're through." And Clem Hardacre did find out—also other things ; among them that a girl's dignity may be a wall of ice, which neither laughter nor story of daring hazards can break down ; and the dinner was almost through, and he was beginning bitterly to regret his late audacity, when a native waitress entered and laid a card before his host. Jacob P. Carlowe glanced at it, and started hurriedly from his chair.

" You'll have to excuse me a minute or two, Hardacre. There's a man downstairs to see me."

He hastened from the room, and as the door closed behind him, Clem Hardacre leaned forward.

" I am in dust and ashes," he said humbly.

The girl made no response, and he continued pleadingly : " Don't be too rough on me, Miss Carlowe, for a venial sin ! "

Still Nancy Carlowe did not speak ; and looking at her austere face he began to think that his offence was mortal. He did not speak again, however. It was not in him to plead overmuch, and as his eyes turned a little desperately from her, they fell on the card which Carlowe had left on the table. Automatically almost his vision registered the name it held, and as it did so, a sudden sharp oath broke from him, startling the girl unutterably. He staggered to his feet like a drunken man, upsetting the glass at his elbow as he did so ; and as she saw the look on his face, Nancy Carlowe broke her frigid silence.

"Mr. Hardacre," she cried in sudden sharp anxiety, "what is the matter? Why——"

"The name on that card," he said hoarsely.

"Yes? Yes?"

"It is the name of the man for whom I was broken."

His face was almost grey; his eyes were blazing, and there was something in them that so stirred her fear that when he turned towards the door she sprang from her chair, and rushing forward reached it first. Turning the key she placed her back against the door.

"Mr. Hardacre," she asked quietly, "where are you going?"

"To get that man," he said with a note in his voice that frightened her. "To wring the truth out of him or twist his neck."

She knew that he meant the words—literally; and her eyes betrayed the fear she felt.

"Don't go," she whispered. "You must not——"

"I must!" he said tensely. "That scoundrel . . . you don't understand . . ."

"For my sake don't go! If you meet him now . . ." she broke off. "If . . . if you——"

"Let me pass, girl," he demanded.

"No!" she said, still in a whisper. "No!"

He laid his hands upon her to swing her aside, and the touch of her bare arms brought him back to reason.

"You haven't got it," he said fiercely. "That man is the scoundrel——"

"Oh, but I have," she said, "And you must

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not go? For your own sake . . . for . . . for mine. You must remain here. You must not leave until my father returns."

"I must," he answered hoarsely. "The scoundrel may go. I may never hear of him—meet him again. This is my one chance, and I mustn't miss it. Stand aside!"

"No!" she answered with a resolution that amazed herself. "I will not let you go! I will not! That man . . . you might kill him. And then——"

As she broke off, he stared at her standing there before him barring his way. Then he laughed harshly, and without a word picked her up, swung her from her feet, and then set her down two yards from the door. With his hand on the knob of the door he remembered that she had locked it.

"The key?" he demanded.

"You shall not have it," she answered. Her hand went swiftly to the bosom of her dress, and a second later fell back empty.

He stared at her with raging eyes, and a little shiver shook her. She had baulked him, if she had not altogether misunderstood his quality—and as he took a step forward, for one moment she feared she had misjudged him, and shivered again. Then he stopped.

"My God!" he whispered. "A little thing like you. I could break you in my hands!" He still stared at her, with stormy eyes; and whilst they stood there, confronting each other, from the corridor outside sounded Carlow's raucous

voice. "Yep! Coffee as slick as you can, and no dish-water, mind you. Black and strong I want it; and look here——"

Nancy Carlowe moved swiftly, inserted the key and silently turned it. She had done what she could; and now the thing was out of her hands. The man whose name was on the card might be coming into the room with her father or he might have left the hotel. She slipped back to her place; her face white, her eyes bright with fear of what might happen. The door opened and her father entered.

"Sorry to have had to leave you, Hardacre. That fellow——"

Clem Hardacre brushed by him without a word and passed from the room. Carlowe stared after him in amazement, then he looked at his daughter.

"What's got the man, Nance?"

Nancy Carlowe pointed to the card still reposing on the table.

"I think he wants to meet the man whose name is there."

Her father started. "Holy snakes! I left it there! And Hardacre read it?"

"Yes, accidentally I think."

Jacob P. Carlowe whistled, and his face told the girl that he understood what lay between Clem Hardacre and the man whom he had gone to seek.

"The devil!" he said.

"He will kill that man——"

Then Carlowe laughed. "He won't find him! It's the dirtiest sort of night outdoors and before Hardacre gets track of him, Jervaux will be half-way across the bay. But I'll have the deuce of a time explaining when Hardacre comes back."

But that trouble was spared him for the present; since, though they waited long, Carlowe pacing the room restlessly, Clem Hardacre did not return that night.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE OLD BLOCK-HOUSE

THE frost had bound the tundra to the hardness of iron ; and the snow had covered it with a white carpet which in turn had crisped in the grip of the frost when Nancy Carlowe and Clem Hardacre met again. Tired of the streets and thrust forth by the need of exercise, she had started for a little octagonal block-house which stands on a point of rock, its rusty six-pounder cannon still projecting their iron muzzles, mute evidence of the wild days when the Russians ruled in the land. She had just reached it, and had stepped inside to shelter from the icy wind, when she saw a man following in her steps across the snow. She recognized him instantly, notwithstanding his long parka, and cap with its fringe of fur ; and for a moment a feeling of panic surged and she was conscious of a desire to run away or hide herself. But to run was vain ; and except in the rear of the block-house or behind snow-covered boulders there was no place to hide, and to reach either she must reveal herself by moving out of the shelter of the tiny fort. Reflecting that in all probability Hardacre had seen her and followed,

she remained where she was in the doorway stamping the snow from her mukluks, and trying vainly to steady the wild beating of her heart. That he had seen her she knew a moment later, for he waved a mittened hand.

That silent greeting reassured her. At any rate he did not come in anger; and perhaps now he understood her interference of a fortnight ago. But her heart none the less continued its wild beating; and the blood was running hotly in her cheeks when he reached the doorway.

"Good morning, Miss Carlowe," he said in quiet greeting. "I saw you coming this way, and I ventured to follow."

"The land is free to all," she retorted with a gaiety that she did not feel, her eyes marking the pinched look on his face and the livid half-moons under his eyes. "And this old block-house too," she added as the wind brought a flurry of snow with it. "Hadn't you better step inside, Mr. Hardacre?"

He accepted her invitation, then without preamble he said: "I owe you an apology—more than one! I acted under great stress the other night, and——"

"Do you think I don't know that!" she broke in, her blue eyes meeting his in level glance. "I can make allowances for some things!"

"And give absolution for all, I hope," he answered, with a touch of humility that she found hard to stand against.

He was deadly serious, and the steady gaze of his steely eyes was a little unnerving, but she

managed to laugh a little as she replied lightly, "Absolution? I am no priest, Mr. Hardacre, but . . . but I say my prayers, and as I myself hope for absolution, I——"

"Thank you," he broke in. "It is very good of you." There was silence for a moment, then she asked abruptly: "Did you find that man Jervaux?"

"No! I combed St. Michael through, looking for him. And it was not until two days later that I learned he had left the town that same night."

"Who told you?" she asked quickly.

"Your father! It appears that the scoundrel was on his way to the waterside when he called to see your father for a few minutes. Almost immediately afterwards he left in a motor-launch for Nome to catch the steamer going South. If I had known that at the time, I would have followed him."

She looked at him gravely, thinking that her father had not found the difficulty in explaining that he had anticipated; and permitting herself to wonder why there should have been any such anticipation at all; then she said quietly: "You understand why I withheld the key, I hope."

"I think I do! But I won't pretend to be grateful. I want that man badly."

She knew that well enough, and she made no comment upon the confession, instead she said: "It was perhaps unpardonable of me to interfere——"

"No!" he broke in. "Not that! You did it for the best—as perhaps it was—God knows! I was wild that night. To have given up hope of finding a man, whom one has sought diligently——"

"You have sought him?"

"Three years!" he answered promptly. "I heard he had gone to the Islands, and I followed. As a matter of fact it appears that he was up here practically all the time."

"How did you learn that?" she asked with quick curiosity. "Did my father tell you?"

"No! He was only the merest acquaintance with Jervaux. I learned it from a business man down town."

Nancy Carlowe found herself wondering whether her father's description of his acquaintance was the correct one. Remembering that without any word from her he had understood why Hardacre should so passionately desire to come face to face with the caller, she was sure that the description was inclined to be a little sketchy, but she did not say so. Instead she remarked: "Then you have been wasting your time?"

"Yes!" he replied, adding grimly, "But next spring he will be up here again, I expect, then I'll get him."

"And if you get him—what then?"

"I'll have the truth out of him, even if I have to cut it out with a knife. And I'll have it signed, sworn to and witnessed as well."

There was a cold passion in his words that told her they were no mere threat, but the expression

of an abiding purpose ; and something more than curiosity prompted her next question.

" Why that—the swearing and the witnessing, I mean ? "

" Because it will be my vindication—my exoneration. I can send it, no, take it to Regina, and Jervaux too——"

" You would take him ? " she cried in surprise. " But you are not a ' Mounter ' now ? "

" What of that ? " he answered with a mirthless laugh. " I don't stand for the law now—and I can work outside it. That is the really fortunate element in the situation. I can do lawless things without breaking the police code ; and if ever I come up with Jervaux, he goes with me, though I march him across the international boundary with an automatic against his spine."

" But he may happen to be an American citizen ? "

" If he is—who cares ? Not I ! All the garrison in Fort Liscum shall not stop me ! That man is worth more to me than my life. I mean just that."

" But why ? "

" ' Who steals my purse steals trash, but who robs me of my good name——' You know the quotation. There are men who knew me, who, if they ever think of me at all, think of me with contempt. I want to wipe that element out of their thoughts——"

" I hope you will succeed," interrupted the girl earnestly. " Almost I begin to regret that I kept the door and allowed that man to get away.

If I had known, but . . . but I was afraid that you would kill him."

"I might have done," he answered with a grim deliberateness that shocked her a little. "I may do so yet, if I don't get the truth out of him."

Nancy Carlowe found herself wondering what the truth was, but she refrained from asking. He had told her that sometime she should hear the story of what had sent him on wild courses, and she schooled herself to wait until the hour for confiding struck.

"You must not kill him," she counselled gently. "You must make him speak."

"I'll do that," he laughed fiercely, "even if I have to use Chinese tortures to induce him."

The girl shuddered a little. The grim earnestness of the man almost frightened her; for she knew that every single word he uttered was meant; and that he would not hesitate to keep alike the spirit and letter of his threats. "I hope there won't be any need for that," she said quietly.

Clem Hardacre did not reply. He stood staring out on the snow-covered tundra, with a bleak look in his eyes. The wind howling across the open flung a flurry of snow in their faces, and the girl stepped back a pace into the shelter the block-house afforded. Then the man spoke abruptly.

"I'm going away to-morrow."

"Where?" she asked, a little startled.

"The long trail. Up to Vungittee and the other posts."

"But you will come back?" she asked, just the faintest note of anxiety in her voice.

"Yes, I hope so. But it will be in the New Year sometime."

She looked out on the dreary waste, half hidden by the whirling snow; then she said: "It must be good to be a man, to face danger and to conquer the waste."

"Yes," he answered simply. "It was because of that I accepted your father's offer. It is a big clean life to fight the wilderness and to win." Then he laughed. "But women have their conquests also."

"Have they?" she asked, knowing it very well, and knowing too that the question was a dangerous one.

"Yes! They make or break men—as the wilderness itself does!"

Nancy Carlowe remembered suddenly Sandilands' gossip about the woman whose persuasion this man was supposed to have yielded to. She did not believe it now; yet somehow that woman had come near to breaking him, and in any case she knew his words were true.

"But a man——" she answered. "Surely he can keep his feet, whatever happens."

"Yes!" he said. "But that's not all. The test is, can he march forward afterwards? If he is without hope as like as not he doesn't trouble."

"But you . . . you will march in hope," she said cheerfully.

"If I only could——" he began, and broke off.

"Why not?" she asked.

Her tone was casual enough; but as he turned swiftly and met her eyes, a flame kindled in his, and the blood surged in his tanned face. For a moment he did not speak, and his mittened hands gripped the cold iron of the toy cannon on which they rested. Nancy Carlowe was prepared for anything and knew that she had invited it. But instead of the outbreak, the passionate declaration that she more than half expected, he answered restrainedly.

"It will be as wings to my feet."

"Wings?" she laughed a little tremulously. "If you had said snowshoes it would have been more appropriate. Look!"

She pointed to the doorway. The dreary landscape was quite blotted out by the whirling snow, and even as she spoke the old block-house rattled under a fierce buffet of the wind.

"By Jove!" he said, "it is coming on. Time to be quitting this, if you don't want to be snow-bound for hours, Miss Carlowe."

"That would never do," she answered laughingly, and moved towards the door. He followed her, and as she stepped outside and the force of the iron wind almost lifted her from her feet, flung an arm around her.

"Pardon!" he shouted. "You'll be blown away if I don't."

She heard him through the screech of the wind, but only laughed in answer. She knew that this was an act of necessity, and not an audacity like

the kissing of her hand a fortnight ago. And even if it had been—— The thought went unfinished. An eddy of the wind brought the hard cutting snow straight in her face, and she gasped for breath. With no very gentle hand, he dragged her fur cap down almost over her eyes, and for a moment they stood leaning all their weight against the wind but held upright by it; then the wind veered and they moved forward once more. Nancy with one mittened hand held up to shield her face.

Stumbling, gasping, and a little shaken they reached an old log building at last; and in the lee of it stood to gain breath, with the snow driving by in solid sheets. She brushed it from her stinging face and then beneath the long wet lashes looked up at him with laughter gleaming in her blue eyes.

“You kept your feet,” she said.

“Yes,” he laughed back. “That is nothing. In my time I have raced for timber through far worse.”

“With wings to help——”

“No!” he broke in. “With death behind to spur.”

“To spur! Yes! The fear of death must prick one forward.”

“That fear is nothing to the hope of——” He checked himself suddenly, and again she challenged his audacity.

“To the hope of what, of life?”

“No! Of love,” he said quietly.

His steel-blue eyes seemed to scorch her. She had heard at last what she had more than half expected to hear at the old block-house ; and for a moment she did not know whether she was glad or not at the certain knowledge which it brought her. She looked straight in front of her at the white sheet of the snow, which had anyone passed at a distance of three yards would still have hidden them in a little world of their own. Her heart was beating wildly, and she knew that a look might break his iron restraint. In a flash she recalled all that she knew of him ; his yet untold story ; his friendship with little San Yee ; his passion to restore himself to the respect of men, and, in spite of the great gaps in her knowledge of him, was sure that a girl might trust her life with him. And she could not look at him, dared not !

Summoning all her will, she took a step forward. " Then," she said tremulously, " we will spur forward ! "

She felt a sudden tightening of the arm about her, but bent her head to the wind and snow and kept resolutely on ; and without another word between them they reached the planked side-walks of the streets. At the hotel she held out her hand.

" You go to-morrow ? " she said quietly.

" Yes ! If the trail permits."

" Then I must wish you good adventure now ! "

" But I am dining with your father to-night."

" And I," she answered with a little laugh, " am dining at the barracks—with the commandant's

wife. Her husband having gone to Unalakik."

She read the disappointment in his face; but he smiled as he met her eyes. "I shall have a wish for myself that I never had before when I broke trail."

"And that?" she asked.

"'Journeys end,'" he answered, and as her face suffused with the tell-tale blood, waved his hand and turned away.

Three strides hid him from her gaze, but she stood there for a moment disregarding the bitter wind and the biting snow.

"'Journeys end,'" she quoted softly, and her mind finished the quotation, and at the same time visioned the wilderness to which he was going. It was a long trail, and a far end, but as she turned into the shelter of the hotel her heart was light, and her eyes were shining.

CHAPTER VII

A MEETING IN THE WILDERNESS

“ **A** GOOD run, Jean ! ”
“ Thirty mile. But for dat beeg jam up de river we would haf make forty.”

“ Always supposing this cold snap hadn’t overtaken us. We should have had to camp in any case. It would be folly to travel in such a temperature.”

“ Oui, m’sieu’. Eet tie us up. We not go forward to-morrow eef de cold continue——”

“ Nor if it doesn’t, I fancy. A lift in the temperature will mean snow.”

“ Dat ees certain, m’sieu’. All de same we soon reach de post of Pierre Georges.”

“ Yes ! We crossed the border this afternoon.”

Clem Hardacre moved a little nearer the centre of the blanket screen stretched so as to throw the heat of the fire backward and downward ; and after lighting a pipe, fell into a reverie which, absorbed in his own reflections, Jean Ladronne did not attempt to interrupt. The fire was a big one, and was needed, for the bitter cold was sufficient to freeze the marrow in a man’s bones ; and even as silence fell between the men, from a little way

in the wood came a sound like a pistol-shot as the heart of some tree unable longer to resist was broken by the frost. Hardacre took not the least notice of the sound, which was a common one of the northern woods; but Jean half-turned, and stared into the blackness of the forest which beyond the radius of the firelight loomed like a wall. The night was deadly still. There was no wind; and all living things had been driven to shelter by the great cold; so that neither the distant cry of wolf, the bark of fox, nor the rustle of small questing creatures broke the intense silence. A little way to the right, hidden by steep banks, was the river, silent also, frozen solid; its friendly babble and murmur hushed until spring should once more ungag it, as it had done through immemorial years. To men unaccustomed to it, that silence was like a tangible presence; and even men inured to it were conscious of its oppressive quality, thrusting upon them as it did the menace of the vast frozen land.

After a little time Jean turned his eyes from the formless darkness of the wood to the leaping flames of the fire, and kicked one of the logs with his foot. It crackled cheerfully; and a shower of sparks shot upward. The voyageur watched them as they gleamed for a brief moment in the blackness overhead and then went out—as the life of man goes out after its momentary glow. A look of melancholy came in his dark eyes; he made as if to speak; but glancing at his companion, refrained, but since the thoughts induced by dark-

ness were disturbing ones, he lit his pipe, and fixed his eyes on the red heart of the fire.

Half an hour passed without either of them speaking. The cold seemed to grow more intense, the deadly silence more profound. Then Ladronne made a slight movement. It was so slight that it did not in any way disturb his companion's prolonged reverie; but an alert look came on his face, a light of expectancy in his eyes; and his head bent slightly sideways in a listening attitude. After a minute or two he gave a sudden exclamation.

"By gar!"

"What is it, Jean?" asked Hardacre quickly.

"Some man come!"

"No," said Hardacre with a smile. "You must have been dreaming."

"Non! Ah hear! Listen."

He lifted his mittened hand for silence, and Hardacre, throwing back the ear-flaps of his cap, bent slightly forward, with an intent fixed look upon his face. At first he thought the Canadian must be mistaken. The intense silence was like a pall over the land, and from it nothing except the sound of the glowing logs issued. He was just about to speak, when through the stillness came a far-away sound which, faint as it was, his ears recognized instantly for the ring of sled-runners on wind-swept ice.

"By Jove, you're right, Jean!"

Ladronne nodded. "Oui, M'sieu' Clem, but who——."

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"Don't know, and can't guess. But whoever the man is he travels late."

"An' he take de risks. Dis cold eet freeze his lungs eef he go vaire far."

"Yes! He must be in a tearing hurry, or he wouldn't face it." He listened again, then added: "Coming down river, I think."

"Oui! Maybe he stop here, eef he came dis far."

No more was said for the moment. The two sat there listening, an absorbed expression on their faces and a fixed intent look in their eyes. Half an hour passed, and as they remained perfectly still the faint far-away whir which to unaccustomed ears would have meant nothing became momentarily more distinct, until it struck through the stillness a long unending note; and to make the matter more certain once a dog yelped as if a whip had found it in a tender place.

"Dere!" said Jean.

"Yes!" replied Hardacre, relaxing his attitude. "There is some one coming, and he is travelling at a rate that invites destruction in this cold."

The drone of the runners grew more plain until it filled the silence like a monotonous song, driving back the hush of the dead which had prevailed; proclaiming as it did movement and sentient life. Jean threw off his rabbit-skin blanket and rose to his feet, his eyes dancing with excitement and expectancy. Hardacre slipped out of the sleeping-bag in which he had been half buried, and threw another log in the fire, sending a shower of sparks

into the night. The Canadian laughed at nothing at all, and took a step towards the river bank.

"Maybe he pass. Ah shout to heem. Den he see."

It was an entirely unnecessary proceeding. Notwithstanding the high bank the glare of their fire must be visible to anyone following the river trail; and camps are not so common in the northern wilderness that a socially inclined man would pass by at that hour of the night. But Clem Hardacre said nothing to hinder his companion. Instead he followed him to the bank, anxious as Jean himself to get the first glimpse of the stranger hurrying towards them through the night. At the top of the bank they halted, stamping their moccasined feet in the snow, staring towards the bend of the river round which the traveller must come into sight. The drone of the runners grew suddenly more clear, then against the snow-covered bank up-river appeared a line of shadows, with bigger shadows at the far end of the line.

"He travel some, by gar!" cried Jean.

"Yes! He's hanging on to the sledge! Wherever he's for he means to make it in double-quick time."

"Oui! But we stop heem!"

Jean gave a vociferous hail, which was answered by the oncoming man, and the dogs down on the trail yelped joyously.

"He cross de river. He come dees way," exclaimed Jean in the voice of one who might have

been expecting a comrade; and then began to shout directions.

The unknown man followed them faithfully, crossed the river diagonally and took the lower slope of the bank a little above the camp, shouting cheerful encouragement to his dogs.

Three minutes later he swept by the place where they were standing, his dogs still running, making a bee-line towards the fire, which their trail knowledge told them meant camp and rest. As he swept past them Hardacre caught the flash of eyes that searched his face, and a second after ran forward with Jean and helped to beat off his own dogs as they sallied from their sleeping holes in the snow to give the new-comers a fighting welcome.

Having driven the huskies back, Clem stood waiting, watching the stranger whilst he fed his team, and wondering who he was. A moment later, as the man, finishing his task, threw open his fur coat, Hardacre saw something gleam on the collar of the stranger's tunic, and guessing that they were the buffalo-head badges of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, was conscious of a sudden constriction at his heart.

"Some cold," said the trooper laconically as he moved towards the fire.

"Yes," answered Hardacre, conscious that the man under a pretended nonchalance was examining both Jean and himself with shrewd eyes. "So cold that we wondered that you dared to travel. Frosted lungs are a through ticket across the Divide, you know."

"Yes! but duty's duty, and I'm in a tearing hurry. That's why I pushed on in spite of the drop in the temperature."

"A hot trail, I suppose?" said Hardacre smilingly.

"I hope so, but it's a blamed illusive one!"

The trooper's eyes turned to Jean as he spoke, in one swift glance took in the details of the camp, then came back to Hardacre. The latter, helped by his own experience, read the new-comer's mind like an open book, and gave a sudden laugh.

"You're wondering if we're your quarry?"

"Now how the deuce did you know that?"

"Well, you don't exactly hide your interest in us, you know."

"Naturally since I'm trailing someone I've never seen, and haven't the slightest idea who you two are."

"That is quickly remedied," was the smiling reply. "This is Jean Ladronne, voyageur and one of the best trail-breakers in the North, and I am Clem Hardacre——"

"Hardacre!" cried the trooper sharply. "Are you the sergeant who was broken at Regina the week I joined."

A look of bitterness chased the smile from Clem Hardacre's face. "I was a sergeant," he owned, "and I was broken, so you may draw your own——"

"By Jupiter," broke in the trooper with an odd note in his voice, "that's queer!"

"Why is it queer?" asked Hardacre sharply.

"Well, you'll own it is yourself, when I tell

you that four days back I met that woman Marie Jervaux——”

“ You met Marie Jervaux ? ” asked Hardacre hoarsely. “ Where ? ”

“ Up at the head of the river. I came on her camp just as I have stumbled on yours. She had a half-breed and an Indian with her—a brace of scoundrels, I’ll swear, and as I remembered her name—it isn’t one to forget, you know—I fished for information and got it. That you should be the very next person I ran against is an amazing thing—the long arm of coincidence with a vengeance, hey ? ”

For a moment Clem Hardacre made no response. There was a hard look on his face and a bleak light in his eyes as he stared across the fire in the darkness beyond, then he said hoarsely : “ What’s she doing—up here, and in winter ? ”

“ Search me,” said the trooper with a little grin. “ She wasn’t my game, and that was enough for me. There’s a limit to the questions a fellow can ask when they’re not in the way of duty.”

“ Who is your game ? ” asked Hardacre sharply.

“ Name unknown,” said the trooper with a grin. “ Crime—whisky-running, frequent an’ freely.”

“ Whisky-running ! ”

There was nothing new in the crime, but nevertheless there was an odd note in Clem Hardacre’s voice, and a sudden alertness in his manner as he cried the words.

“ Yes ! This end of the Territory is fairly flooded

with it, and has been this two months, and I can't get track of the source of it at all."

"Didn't happen to tap Marie Jervaux's dunage?" asked Hardacre with a harsh laugh.

"You're wrong there, Hardacre! I did. For I reckoned a woman can smuggle whisky across the border as well as or better than a man. But I drew a blank."

"And then came after us, I suppose?"

"It wasn't you who brought me this way, though I'll own that when I struck your trail two days back I thought it might be worth while to follow you, and learn who you were. What really brought me down here was news that I gathered about a new trading-post not far from old Mikaket's camp on the Black River! Know anything about it, Hardacre?"

"Yes!" answered Hardacre quietly. "I know quite a lot. You see, I built it."

"The devil you did?" There was an oddly suspicious note in the trooper's tones as he cried the words.

"Yes; and it is under my jurisdiction and direction now."

"The deuce it is!"

The trooper stared at Clem Hardacre, amazedly, then again his eyes wandered round the camp, rested for a moment on Ladronne busy with the frying-pan, and finally came back to Clem Hardacre. That he was a little perturbed was clear; and what was in his mind was revealed a second later.

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"Say, Hardacre, you don't stand for anything so low down as rot-gut smuggling, do you?"

"You have my assurance on that point," was the answer quietly given.

"But who's to know that it is so? Don't you get in a flurry, my son. I'm not challenging your word. I believe from all I've heard about you one time or another that it's better than the Bible-oath of most men, but all the same 't isn't my business to accept any man's word. I've just got to *know*; you were one of us once, an' you'll understand that, Hardacre."

"Yes," answered Hardacre, a trifle harshly. "I understand, and if I were in your shoes I should want to search our dunnage. You have my leave to do so any moment you like. Neither Jean nor I will interfere."

"Thanks!" The trooper looked steadily at him for a moment, and Hardacre met his gaze with eyes as steady as his own. Then the officer laughed. "We'll let it go at that. I'll forgo the right."

"I might be bluffing, you know," said Hardacre with a hard laugh.

"Then you bluff better than any man I ever met," laughed the other in return.

"All the same," was the reply, "I think I should like you to make the search—for Jean's sake and my own."

The trooper stared at him in astonishment. "But why in thunder should I do that when I'm dead sure you're not in the rotten game?"

"It may save trouble later on. You might wish afterwards that you had done it, and—well, I have my own reasons for asking you to oblige me."

The trooper laughed abruptly. "Well, if it's to oblige you, I'll do it, Hardacre, though of course the thing is just a d——d farce."

Without more ado he stalked to the place where Hardacre's possessions were stacked, some on the sled and some on the snow, and went through them with a scientific celerity that won their owner's approval. When he had finished he turned round and laughed again.

"A blank—as I expected! Now tell me why you wanted me to do that piece of fool work?"

"No, I won't tell you that," answered Hardacre slowly. "It's a secret at present. I'm sorry to mystify you, my friend——"

"Trevor is my name."

"Thanks! As I was saying I'm sorry to mystify you, Trevor; but you may come to understand later. Anyway I can't explain at this moment. It's enough that you give Jean and me a clean bill. . . . Now I think you had better tackle that moose-steak of Jean's before it freezes."

Trevor laughed, and followed his suggestion, and after he had eaten, and had drunk a pint of steaming coffee, all three of them seated themselves in front of the fire, and smoked in silence, until Hardacre said tentatively: "I wonder if you'd mind telling me about this whisky-running, Trevor."

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"Depends on what you want to know, Hardacre. There is not much beyond the bare fact that whisky is flowing freely all up this end of the Territory."

"And you have no suspicion how it gets in?"

"Across the border, of course. Though I haven't been able to locate the point or points where it crosses. All I know is that there might be a pipeline laid on from the way it's running in the country."

"And you've no suspicion as to who is responsible?"

"Well, I won't say that," replied Trevor cautiously.

"Then you have?"

The trooper laughed a little awkwardly. "Every man is suspect in a business of this sort till one is satisfied that he's innocent; as you ought to know, Hardacre."

Clem Hardacre smiled a little grimly. He knew that the answer was a mere evasion, and he himself replied accordingly, "You mean you're not prepared to tell me?"

"Well," answered Trevor with a deprecating laugh. "I shouldn't put it so brutally. But that is what it amounts to, I suppose. You must know, Hardacre, that a fellow in my line must keep his counsel."

"I may be able to help you," suggested Hardacre tentatively.

"And equally you might give the game away," replied the trooper blandly. "Mind you, I'm not saying you'd do anything of the sort. I don't

believe you would let a fellow down that way. But accidents will happen, and information has a way of travelling to quarters one would keep it from, so a shut mouth's no more than wisdom."

For a little time Clem Hardacre did not speak. He stared into the fire, with a black frown half hiding his eyes; and both Jean and the trooper supposed him to be out of temper at the latter's refusal to confide in him, but in that they were probably mistaken; for when he again broke the silence there was no hint of anger in his tones. His voice was smooth and even, and his manner quite friendly.

"You're right, of course, Trevor. But all the same I want you to tell me something—for merely personal reasons. You can snap up every whisky-runner in the country for me. I've no liking for that kind of cattle."

"Well, if I can, consistent with my duty, I don't mind obliging you, Hardacre. What is it you want to know?"

"First I want to know where you are going when you take the trail again?"

Trevor laughed a little awkwardly. "Well, I'm going on to that trading-post on the Black River, which you built. You say it is under your direction now; and I expect I am wasting time in going to nose round there; though of course I may pick up something at old Mikaket's camp."

"That's possible enough; and you're welcome to search the post so far as I am concerned. But I've another question to ask. Where was Marie

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Jervaux going when you struck her camp?"

"She was coming this way. Destination I don't know. That was no affair of mine, and she didn't volunteer the information."

"Thank you! That's all I want to know. I hope you'll get your man or men without difficulty. Whisky in the Territory is a serious thing, and if it's running as free as you say, it will mean the ruin of the tribes if the tap isn't turned off."

"It's just got to be stopped," said Trevor simply. "And I've got to do it."

No more was said about the matter for the moment: but when the trooper was slumbering soundly in his sleeping-bag Jean Ladronne lifted his head from his rabbit-skin blanket and after staring for a moment in the direction of Trevor, turned towards Hardacre, who still sat by the fire, smoking, with a dark look on his face. The Canadian next slid from beneath the blanket, and moved noiselessly to his companion's side.

"M'sieu' Clem," he whispered, "you t'ink dat Black Georges ees at hees old game?"

"I think you and I are just a pair of dupes," replied Hardacre, a savage note in his hoarse whisper.

"As how, m'sieu'?"

"Carlowe's behind the whisky-running, or I am mistaken—*behind*, you understand—whilst we two poor fools sit in the front seats for the benefit of the Mounted if anything goes wrong."

"*Sacre!*" exclaimed Jean in a sharp whisper. "Ah keel Pierre eef eet ees so."

"Pierre's no more than a tool. It's Carlowe who is behind it all—must be. Carlowe and Sandilands and God knows who besides. And they think they'll make a stalking horse of me!"

He laughed softly, mirthlessly as he spoke, but in his eyes there was a look of cold rage that told what he really felt; and Jean nodded in sympathy.

"An' of me, m'sieu'. Dame! But we show dem. When we get to Black River——"

"I shall turn back in the morning," broke in Hardacre quickly. "I want to meet that woman of whom Trevor spoke. If I know anything she's in this business, and her brother too."

"Her brother! Ah did not hear de mounter mention——"

"No, he didn't! But I happen to know that the scoundrel was in touch with Carlowe just before we left St. Michael, and that knowledge is illuminating. To-morrow you will go on to Black River and keep an eye on Pierre Georges whilst I go back on our trail."

"But, m'sieu'——"

"That's how I have planned it, Jean, and you'll oblige me by doing what I want you to do."

"Vaire well, m'sieu'! But eef dat Black Georges haf sell your honour an' mine, Ah keel——"

"No! Let the mounter take him. That will be the better way."

"Maybe! But——"

"You will do as I want, Jean? There's more

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behind all this than you know ; and Carlowe has got to sweat for it—Judas that he is ! ”

“ Vaire well, M’sieu’ Clem,” said Ladronne resignedly. “ Ah do as you say, an’ Ah wait your arrival at Black River ? ”

“ Yes. But you needn’t tell Georges anything except that I am delayed. I’ll be along as soon as possible, and if by that time, Trevor hasn’t found the whisky cache, I will—if I pull that blasted post log from log.”

“ Right, m’sieu’. But dat Trevor dere, he weel t’ink eet queer dat you go away on de back-trail.”

“ I daresay. He can think what he likes. I mean to get at the bottom of this business, and I’ll take my oath Marie Jervaux knows where the bed-rock lies.”

“ An’ dat mounter he know more dan he tell ! ”

“ That’s certain, I think.”

“ Maybe he follow you, m’sieu’, instead of goin’ to Black Georges.”

“ That is possible. He is bound to be suspicious. But that can’t be helped.”

And in the morning it proved to be so. When Jean proposed to accompany him whilst Hardacre went back on the trail, Trevor’s suspicions showed plainly in his frank, open face.

“ What’s the game, Hardacre ? ” he demanded sharply.

“ There is no game, Trevor,” answered the other quietly. “ At least none that is in conflict with yours.”

Trevor looked at him steadily and the suspicion

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faded from his face. Then he asked: "Honest Injun?"

"Honest as gold! Anything I do will help your game."

"Then shake!" said Trevor.

And the two shook hands and went their separate ways in the snowy vastness.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOTS IN THE STORM

ABOUT the time that Trooper Trevor swung up the bank of the river to Clem Hardacre's camp, in a camp fifty miles distant in a crow's flight, Jacob P. Carlowe sat in whispered conversation with another man. The latter, whom he addressed as Gaston, was a young man, handsome in a dark gipsy fashion, with black, roving eyes that invariably failed to meet the eyes of any person with whom he happened to be conversing. Just now their natural furtiveness was more pronounced than usual, and the fact worried Carlowe into a hasty expletive.

"D——n you, Gaston, can't you keep your eyes this way. One would think you expected a ghost to walk out of these black woods."

"Eet is not the ghost, Carlowe," answered the young man with an accent that, though slight, proclaimed the French province for his birthplace. "Eet is Miss Nanceey. I am afraid that she weel hear, eef you talk so loud."

"Nance is asleep long ago. She was dead tired when we hit this camping-place."

"That is true," agreed Gaston. "She finds the trail *vaire* hard."

"Can't think why she wanted to come," growled Jacob P. Carlowe, adding unamiably, "Nor why you were such a fool as to encourage her in the idea."

The younger man laughed softly. "Eet is what you call the adventure for her. To take the North trail is romance, an' all young ladies are romantic."

"That's your idea of it, is it?"

"Yes, Carlowe!"

"Well, as it happens, I don't think so."

"You don't. Then you think—what?"

"I think she has an idea of the game, and that's why she insisted on coming along."

"But what can eet matter, eef she has?"

"I guess she's particular, an' doesn't stand for that sort of thing—and it might be awkward if anything happened—I mean if she found out."

His companion laughed softly at some thought of his own. Then he said: "We must not haf that, no! We must watch against eet, *vaire* carefully."

"There's one thing—we shan't bang up against Hardacre. By this time he should be well on his way to Vungittee, if he's worked according to schedule."

"There is not any doubt that he will do that, I suppose. Eet would be mos' dam' awkward eef he come to de Black River an' find us there."

"And find you there, you mean, Gaston. I can understand your anxiety."

"That man is the incarnate devil! I cannot think why you brought him in."

"That was Sandilands' doing. He thought he would be a perfect tool, hating the Mounted as he does; and we hadn't run up against you at the time."

"Eet is a pity that you haf asked heem. Eef we meet and he learns the game one of us will be keeled. That is certain."

"Guess I know that! You won't have to meet; that's all. And this trip there's no likelihood of it. I gave him his instructions, and he's not likely to go the other way round."

"You nevaire know what he will do—that man."

"Well, it's no good worrying over bad ice till you come to it, Jervaux. You carry a pistol and can shoot as straight as another when you're put to it."

"Yes, Carlowe, an' this time I shall shoot on sight, for eet will not be any good a moment after."

"Then shoot! I shan't care. The fellow has a sight too many meeting-house notions for me. He ought to have been a blamed missionary."

Gaston Jervaux laughed a little uncomfortably. "Eet is because you do not know him, Jacob, that you think so. I haf the man seen een action, an' I know. But what matter. There is always the leetle gun an' the queeck sight."

"Yep!" snapped Carlowe, adding carelessly, "And up here in these woods I guess you can do 'most anything."

"Oui! The woods are vaire silent."

Jacob P. Carlowe looked round the ghostly darkness and gave a little shiver. "You're right there, Gaston. They're too blamed still for me. I guess I'm going to turn in and forget them for a while."

"And I weel a leetle longer smoke by de fire," said Jervaux. He began to pack his pipe, watching Carlowe with careless eyes as he entered the little rot-proof tent standing by his daughter's, then lighting it with a stick from the fire he inhaled the smoke luxuriously and gave himself up to thought. From the dark frown that settled on his rather swarthy face it was clear that his thoughts were not pleasant ones. Once or twice he looked towards the tent where Nancy Carlowe slumbered and on those occasions there was a gleam of cunning in his dark eyes.

"Eef she think of that Hardacre——" he whispered to himself and broke off.

Then the frown lifted and a crooked smile came on his face, his eyes glowing in the firelight like a wolf's.

"Eet must be managed soon," he whispered, again. "Oui! But how?"

Again the frown came on his face, and he sat lost in thought for quite a long time. Then he laughed silently at some thought that pleased him.

"Oui! That will do vaire well!"

He knocked the ashes from his pipe; looked once more round the camp, and for a moment let his eyes dwell on Nancy Carlowe's tent.

"I am vaire glad you came, *ma chérie*," he whispered chucklingly. "Your father he has the word said. Up in de woods a man can do 'most anything, an' this thing eet is not impossible. Non!"

Again he gave himself to silent mirth, and after a last look round slid into his sleeping-bag, and slept the sleep of a man whose conscience has long ceased to trouble him.

In the morning with a rising temperature and under a sky that threatened snow, they took the trail again, making between the woods for the river on which the post was set. The party consisted of two dog teams with a pair of half-bred drivers, Gaston Jervaux, Carlowe and his daughter; and since Nancy had no liking for Jervaux, she followed the cavalcade at a little distance, absorbed in her own thoughts.

That morning, she understood, they would reach the river, and to-morrow at the latest arrive at the post of which Pierre Georges had charge. What would happen when they reached it she had no idea. Her father's suspicions as to her reason for insisting on making this wild winter journey into the wilderness were, if he had but known it, more correct than Gaston Jervaux's explanation of the lure of romance. From the moment of Clem Hardacre's refusal to trade whisky at the new posts, in spite of her father's apparent acceptance of that decision, she had been sure that the forbidden spirit was to be used to attract the Indians. Her father was a resolute man, and his

yielding of his purpose had been altogether too easy for anyone who really knew him to be convinced of his good faith in the matter. And with the appearance of Gaston Jervaux on the scene her suspicions had mounted rapidly, until they became positive convictions; and added to these was the further conviction that Jervaux would seize any opportunity to do harm to the man of whom, as she was assured, he still went in fear. It was to watch Clem Hardacre's interests as well as she could, that she had insisted on accompanying her father, instead of remaining at St. Michael as the guest of the wife of the commandant at Fort Liscum, and with every new camp her conviction that there was need for such watchfulness had deepened.

Now as she bent her head to the increasing wind, her eyes occasionally caught Jervaux's tall form moving ahead with one of the Indians; and each time a look of dislike came on her face. She almost hated the man; first because she knew that he was Clem Hardacre's enemy; and secondly, because of the attentions he insisted on paying to her whenever opportunity was afforded. The man was evil; he had the cunning of the weasel and the heart of a wolf; and as she looked round the desolation through which they moved, and then caught sight anew of his swaying figure, a sudden fear mingled with her dislike of him. If anything should happen to her father, she would be at the man's mercy and——

A flurry of snow driven by the wind straight

into her face broke off her thought. She gasped for breath, and pulled the hood of her fur parka farther over her face. The snow passed, but the wind began to increase in violence, shrieking in the tree-tops, meeting them in gusty volleys, and lifting the snow in little eddies. Once or twice the volleys almost brought her to a standstill; but still Jervaux and the teams pushed on; and she, keeping her position at the rear, followed the trail packed by the others. A shout from Jervaux came down the wind, and was echoed by her father.

“The river!”

As the cry reached her, she knew that the end of this long journey through the wilderness was in sight. Once on the river the going would be easier, quicker; and if no untoward thing intervened, the day's march might see them at their destination. Then whilst the thought was still in her mind, in a shrieking gust came the intervention—a rain of icy particles that smote her face with a hundred stings, and brought her up gasping for breath. It passed; but a second gust followed and a third; and then shrieking and roaring through the trees, growing every moment in power, the wind loosed all the hate of the North.

Malignant and merciless, in oblique lines from which there was no escape came the snowy particles, hard and shot-like, in such multitude that they were like a solid sheet. One moment she saw Jervaux's tall form and the Indians by the toiling dogs, her father marching a little to the rear, and the next they were completely blotted from her

view. She stood quite still for a moment, thinking that the gust would pass ; but it failed to do so, or rather it was followed so swiftly by another that the interval between was scarcely perceptible. She began to stagger forward again, half-blinded by the icy smother, her face smarting as if from the lashing of uncounted whips ; and with every step the wind mounted and the smother grew worse. She could hear nothing, see nothing except the whirling snow particles which struck to blind the eyes that looked on them. The snow-dust seemed to cease falling. It rose from the earth at her feet, materialized out of space in front of her, whirled all around in a blinding cloud that was like an illimitable swarm of malignant insects. It blew into her eyes, her nostrils, found its way under her tight-fitting fur hood to her ears, drove into the fur of her parka until it was more like a solid sheet of white, and many pounds heavier.

She lost all sense of direction, and as she staggered forward, fearful of being lost, she cried out for help. The wind, shrieking in might, took her cry and flung it wide over the wilderness. It was certain that no one could possibly have heard her in the tumult and riot of the storm ; but scarcely had the cry gone from her, when out of the smother lurched a tall, snow-covered form. It was Gaston Jervaux, and notwithstanding her dislike of the man, she was glad to see him at that moment. He shouted something, what she could not hear, and the next moment he flung an arm round her. Even in the very real peril of the moment she resented

the freedom of his action, remembering at the same time a similar audacity on the part of Clem Hardacre to which she had not objected. She strove to free herself; but if Jervaux was conscious of her efforts he took no notice of them, but half dragged her forward until they reached a place where the sleds had halted, and where the Indians and her father were striving to make a camp.

Panting with his exertions, Gaston Jervaux came to a standstill, and with both hands holding her arms, looked into her face. She was pale with anger, and under the hood her eyes flashed with indignation. But Jervaux only laughed.

"You did not like eet, Mademoiselle Nancy," he shouted in her ears. "But eet was better than death, much better; as *this* is sweet as life."

Before she knew what he was about, he kissed her lips; and with a laugh lifted her to the shelter of one of the sleds, from which already one of the Indians had unpacked her sleeping-bag. He flung it to her, his eyes dancing with laughter.

"Get in," he shouted, "or you freeze solid."

In spite of the cold and bitter snow her face was scarlet with indignation, and she could have wept for humiliation of that kiss; but for the moment she could not even voice resentment, for the wind would have denied her a hearing. The sleeping-bag offered refuge not only from the storm but from those laughing eyes; and she slid into it without a word, covering even her head. In its concealment a sob broke from her, and a

second, but the third was checked by the surge of a sudden fear. By his audacious action Gaston Jervaux had openly declared his attitude towards her. The constant attention he had shown on the long trail from St. Michael, had focused itself in that kiss, taken almost under her father's eyes. Did her father know of his pretensions and countenance them ; or was Jervaux altogether reckless of what either Jacob Carlowe or herself thought ? The first alternative was absolutely inconceivable ; and the second brought no comfort, brought indeed a sense of menacing peril. Both she and her father were at this man's mercy ; and whilst self-interest might keep him from extremes, there was a possibility that he might take advantage of his power to press himself upon her, regardless of all things else.

Lying there in the darkness of the sleeping-bag, with the storm hurtling about her, and the fine snow-dust forcing itself through the lacings, her thoughts went out to Clem Hardacre, to watch whose interests she had placed herself in peril. Where was he now ? Near at hand or five hundred miles away, in the thick of the woods or on some open barren where this sudden storm would rage in the fullness of its power ? To know him near at hand that moment would have brought her immeasurable consolation ; whilst the probability that he was far away brought instead a heavy sense of depression.

How long she lay there thinking these thoughts she never knew, but presently the edge of them

was dulled by drowsiness induced by the warmth of the sleeping-bag, and after lingering for a little time in that intermediate stage between wakefulness and slumber, she passed over the border into sleep.

Out of that she woke suddenly with the sound of a shout in her ears. Thinking she must have been dreaming, she lay wide-eyed, listening. The voice of the storm still hummed through the skin covering; and for the moment she could hear nothing else; then as a roaring gust passed, and was followed by a brief space of comparative calm, she heard her father's voice cry out in anger:

"No, by G——, you don't!"

The words were followed by three sounds that made her heart stand still; sounds that were almost simultaneous and which she knew were the cracks of rifle or pistol. A cry followed, half drowned in a new surge of the storm, and with a mad fear in her mind, anticipating something terrible, she flung back the flap of the bag, and dragging herself half-way out, stared round.

The sleds had been dragged together and placed at right angles against the wind to form a screen. Inside the angle a fire had been kindled which hissed and spluttered under the driving snow. Dimly she discerned other things. A third sledge standing a little way apart, her father standing close to her, swaying, with something held in his hand. A little way off, the two half-breeds stood staring at something in the snow, over which Gaston Jervaux was bending.

Remembering the shots, it came to her suddenly that the thing at which they were staring was a man. But what man? A great fear surged in her heart. Driven by it she scrambled out of the bag with incredible swiftness, and ran towards the man over whom Jervaux was still stooping. She dropped on her knees, stared intently at the white unconscious face, and then gave a sobbing cry of relief as she saw that it was the face of a stranger. She staggered to her feet, and as she did so caught sight of a crimson stain in the snow by the prone man's side. Then she looked at her father. He was still standing where he had been, a look of dazed tragic horror on his face; and quite suddenly she realized that the thing in his hand was a pistol. In a flash she comprehended something of what had happened, her mind inevitably linking that apparently dead man whose blood was crimsoning the snow with the weapon in Carlowe's hand. She began to stumble towards him.

"Oh—h! Father! Father! What have you done? Why——" The pitiful cry was never completed; nor the answer to it given; for she staggered suddenly, stumbled and measured her length in the snow, and under the stress of grief and shock fainted, in the very moment that Jacob P. Carlowe himself swayed violently and then crumpled up in the snow. One of the half-breeds saw him fall and shouted; and leaving the stranger lying where he was, Jervaux ran towards his employer. Before he reached him he stumbled on Nancy Carlowe, in a deep faint and half buried

in the snow. He stopped, gathered her up, slid her half-way into the sleeping-bag from which she had so recently emerged ; then as one of the half-breeds hurried to him he barked a sharp order ; and the man ran back to Carlowe. Jervaux himself followed, and hastily began to examine the fallen man. A neat puncture in the shoulder of his parka told its own tale, and as he stared into the unconscious face, one of the half-breeds shouted a question.

" Non ! " he answered back with a harsh laugh. " He will not die, but that other one may."

Then for a moment his eyes turned to Nancy Carlowe, lying unconscious in her sleeping-bag, and a light of triumph leaped in them.

" So, *ma petite*, the cards come to my hand—a royal flush ! "

And he laughed once more as with the assistance of one of the *métise* he carried the senseless Carlowe towards the fire.

CHAPTER IX

THE STARK REALITY

OUT of the darkness of unconsciousness Nancy Carlowe emerged, to find herself in her sleeping-bag, warm and comfortable but with a strange sense of oppression crushing her. The next moment she was conscious of motion, and guessed from the bumping beneath her that she was on the sled and crossing a stretch of rough ice. What was happening? What had happened?

As her mind asked these questions almost simultaneously the remembrance of the storm came to her quite distinctly. She remembered crawling into her sleeping-bag, indignant and humiliated by Gaston Jervaux's kiss, remembered quite distinctly both the apprehensive thoughts that had assailed her, and the dulling of the edge of them through increasing somnolence, and after that—Her mind grew suddenly alert. A dim recollection of tragic occurrences came to her, and as she strove to bring them to full remembrance, she visioned quite suddenly a man lying dead in the snow, with Gaston Jervaux stooping over him, whilst her father stood swaying with a pistol in his hand.

Was the picture she visioned a remembrance

of stark reality ; or was it just one of those mirages of nightmare which torture the restless brain in uneasy sleep ? At first she could not decide. She closed her eyes in an effort of remembrance, and as she did so the veil was lifted. Uncertainty ended. She heard her father shouting in rage. Through the roar of the storm she caught again the crack of pistols ; and through the blurring snow, saw Jervaux stooping over the man into whose face she had stared in a very agony of apprehension. The picture of the tragic scene limned in her brain in terrible moments was reconstructed by it with quite startling distinctness, and the agony of that moment, voiced in her pitiful cry, surged in her anew. As she lay there she shook in the stress of it. The tragic happening was no dream, it was as real as life and death, and her father——

In acute distress she tore at the fastening of the sleeping-bag, and thrust her head forth. It was night, but overhead the Aurora flung great ribbons of light across the zenith, filling the still white world of the wilderness with its fluorescent radiance, and enabling her to see things quite clearly. She was, as she had already divined, tied on one of the sleds and ahead she could see a figure breaking trail on the newly-fallen snow, between high tree-crowned river banks. Turning her head, she saw the second sled following some distance behind, whilst between the two walked a tall man whom she recognized as Gaston Jervaux. A third man walked by the dogs of the second sled, too short

to be her father, who was nowhere visible, and as a new fear surged in her she cried out in agony :

"Mr. Jervaux ! Mr. Jervaux !"

Her voice, full of agonized apprehension, seemed to shatter the stillness of that ghostly world, echoing from bank to bank, quiveringly. She saw Gaston Jervaux quicken his pace, and as he overtook the sled on which she was riding, she cried in anguished tones : "My father—where is he ?"

"On the sled behind, mademoiselle."

"He . . . he was hurt ? I . . . I saw him fall."

"Oui ! That dam' mounter did heem shoot in de shoulder."

"O-o-h !" she said sobbingly, and then controlling her voice, she asked : "The injury is serious ?"

"No !" laughed Jervaux. "In a week he will be moving about again."

His assurance lessened her apprehension a little, and after a moment she asked : "But why did the man shoot him ?"

"That, I weel explain presently, when we arrive at de post. But eet will please you to know that Meester Carlowe was de better shot ; and that he keeled de mounter dead as a brick."

"Killed him !" There was horror in the girl's tones. "My father killed a man ?"

"Dead as de nail of a door," replied Jervaux with a laugh of satisfaction. "So he will not us trouble any more."

"But," she said in a strained voice, "the

Mounted Police can hang my father for that ! ”

“ Eef they hear of eet ; an’ eef they him catch, oui ! But who will them tell ? ”

The girl did not reply. His point of view with its easy dismissal of her father’s guilt was one that she could not understand. There was horror in her eyes as she stared at the white unbroken trail ahead, lit by the flickering Northern Lights. As she recalled the stranger into whose face she had stared, oppressed by the fear that he was Clem Hardacre, a great fear for her father’s safety surged within her. She had read of the tenacity with which the Mounted Police clung to the trail of the criminal whom they wanted ; the pursuit of fugitives across thousands of miles of wilderness ; of chases that had lasted more than a year in which the guilty ones had been cornered at last ; and it wrung her heart with terror to think that now her father would be in the position of one of those fugitives from the untiring and implacable justice of the Law-bringers of the wilderness. Her eyes left the waste ahead, and once more looked up at Gaston Jervaux.

“ We are hurrying to the trading-post.”

“ Oui ! Mademoiselle Nanceey. Eet not do your father great harm to ride on the sled ; and eet was not wise to stop in that place where the mounter was shot. If we there had stayed, then more like than not some other mounter would happen along, and then the fat would make the fire blaze, *comprenez-vous ?* Eet would have much better been eef we had stayed in the camp, until Meester

Carlowe's wound had healed a leetle; but there is very leetle risk for him travelling on the sled; whilst there was much risk that if we stay in that place we might be found; so I take the leetler risk, and move on. But now you must me excuse, Mademoiselle Nanceey. I must take the turn at trail-breaking, which ees a vaire hard task een the new snow."

He did not wait for any further question, but quickening his pace, hurried to the head of the team to relieve the half-breed who was breaking trail; and a minute or two later, she saw his tall form moving ahead packing the trail for the dogs. She looked back at the sled where her father was lashed in his sleeping-bag, and a great longing to know the truth about the affray surged within her. Why had the mounted policeman fired on her father; why had her father returned the fire with such deadly effect? Why had that man whom she had seen lying on his back in the snow interfered with her father at all, since he had done no wrong, and indeed was but going on his lawful occasions?

But were they lawful? The question slid in her mind on the heels of the other questions, and she faced it with courage. As she recognized there was more than a possibility that they were not; that in some way either Gaston Jervaux or her father or both of them together had broken the law to administer which had been the duty of the dead man. In what particular they had transgressed, if they had done so at all, she could only surmise. Her suspicion that her father had

gone behind Clem Hardacre's back to introduce the forbidden whisky into the Territory was a sufficient explanation of what had occurred ; and dismay overwhelmed her, as she reflected on the possibilities ahead.

The cold wind blowing down the trail stung her face and she slid down into the sleeping-bag anew to save herself from frost-bite. There she once more began to review the terrible events that had brought to her such dismay ; and as the sled moved forward mile by mile, her mind worked in the endless circle of conjecture ending always on the same note of interrogation—why ? why ? why ?

How long she lay there, torturing herself with unanswerable questions, she never knew. That it was some hours she was sure ; and all the time her torturing reflections went on without ceasing, finding nothing new to illuminate the situation and failing in any way to draw the sting of the hard facts of it. Then a shout broke on her bitter reverie ; she heard the dogs yelp joyously, and the speed of the sled quickened. Something was happening, and anxious to discover what it was she threw back the flap of her sleeping-bag and looked forth.

The glow of the Aurora had died away ; and through the grey gloom which shrouded the white world at first she saw nothing but the high tree-lined banks on either hand, and the trail ahead. The dogs, however, were moving at a pace which told they were excited, as an occasional joyous yelp confirmed ; and to her drifted the sound of

laughter from the two half-breeds who now were marching together. The laughter was followed by words.

"Dere! We haf mak' eet in dwo hours under de time."

A guttural voice gave a laughing answer as once more she stared through the grey gloom of the Arctic night; then quite suddenly, as one of the half-breeds left his fellow, she saw ahead a dim yellow radiance that could only be the light of a lamp shining through a parchment window. Her heart leaped painfully at the sight. The building from which that light shone could be no other than the trading-post which was their destination; and soon she would be able to learn the truth of those events which had perplexed her for hours.

Heedless of the cold she stared at that yellow spot in the grey dimness which held all the world in thrall. The lines of the woods on either side of the river were in deepest shadow; the snow-covered trail between the banks was an almost ghastly way; everywhere was the suggestion of desolation, save in that dim spot of light which betrayed the habitation of man. The light grew more prominent; and as she watched she saw the shadowy outline of the post grow distinct from the denser shadow of the forest, limned in the snow which lay between them, and soon she was able to make out the stockade which surrounded the long low building in which the light glared; then one of the half-breeds yelled sharply, the dogs yelped joyously; and whilst they were still two-

score yards from the building with the opening of a door a broad shaft of ruddy light cut the grey-ness, and a moment later two men appeared upon the bank, breaking the stillness with vociferous shouts of welcome.

The whips cracked, and the half-breeds yelled encouragement as the dogs took the bank, swept forward over the flat and through the open gate into the stockade, whilst a clamour of laughter and shouting voices filled the little compound. Men were still laughing, still shouting questions as she wriggled free of the sleeping-bag, but just as she stepped from the sled to the snow, Gaston Jervaux's voice broke on the clamour, harsh and dominant.

"Queeck, you fools! Carry de boss into de house!"

The clamour died away suddenly, as the two half-breed drivers ran to the second sled; and whilst the men were struggling with the frozen lashing, a big burly man moved up to Jervaux and asked sharply: "De boss, he ees seeck?"

"Oui! He haf been shot in the shoulder."

"Shot?" The single word expressed the amazement which the speaker felt; and with a grim laugh, Jervaux replied:

"Oui! A mounter plugged him way back down the trail. The police fool wanted to examine de sleds and Meester Carlowe objected; for de good reason, you comprehend. There was a row an' then there was shooting an' we left de trooper back there in the snow—dead."

"You leave him! Dame! Dat ees one beeg meestake. Some one find heem an' dere weel be trouble. You ought to haf chop a hole in de ice an' shove heem through; den in de spring with de break-up of de ice he go down to the Porcupine an' nobody find heem for months, maybe not at all. A dead mounter ees a more dangerous one dan a leeving one—when he haf so died."

Nancy Carlowe shuddered at the brutal callousness of the big dark-faced man, and waited for Jervaux's reply.

"Eet is not my funeral, Georges. Eet is that of de boss. But the wolves will maybe eat the man, or we can go back and do what we ought to have done at the time. Just now there are other things to do."

Again the girl shuddered as she realized fully the character of the men among whom she was thrown in the remote wilderness, and with despair clutching at her heart, she followed the two half-breeds who were carrying her father into the house. With stony eyes she watched them as they stripped the sleeping-bag from his limp figure. As they did so, Carlowe's eyes opened, glittering with unnatural light and he began to babble incoherently. At that the girl gave a little cry; and Gaston Jervaux turned to her and offered consolation.

"Dat is nothing, Mademoiselle Nanceey. Eet is just the fever. The journey for a sick man has been most trying; but now I fish for the bullet, an' when I haf found eet and haf eet remove the fever it weel pass, oh yees! And in a week Meester

Carlowe weel be as lively as a puppy. You must not make unnecessary trouble for yourself when there is not any need."

Nancy did not reply, and Jervaux, turning away from her, gave instructions for her father to be laid upon the table under the swing kerosene lamp. That done he opened the injured man's tunic and underclothing, removed the plug that had been used to check the flow of blood, and then sterilizing a penknife in the red heat of the stove, began to operate whilst the other four men held Carlowe on the table. Groans and a babble of oaths came from the injured man, and Nancy Carlowe shut her eyes, and put her hands over her ears to keep out the sounds, waiting in an agony of mind for the dreadful surgery to finish. Suddenly through the muffling hands her ears caught a single sharp exclamation of satisfaction, and opening her eyes, saw Jervaux holding something in his bloodstained hand. The man whom she had heard addressed as Georges looked at the object, and offered callous comment. "Dat ees de Colt '45. Ah know, for Ah haf had one take out of my leg."

"Oui! The mounters use the '45; well, there's dat!" As he spoke Jervaux turned and tossed the bullet in the stove, then he spoke crisply: "Now for the carbolic acid and a bandage, and we will haf the boss walking about in a week."

The things he asked for were handed to him by Pierre Georges, and five minutes later the rude operation was finished and grey-faced and unconscious, Jacob P. Carlowe was lying in a bunk with

the blankets drawn to his chin. The girl dropped to her knees by his side. Carlowe's eyes were closed and to her his face had the same grey look as that of the man upon whom she had looked through the blinding snow, at the camp from which they had fled in such haste. He looked like a dead man, she thought, shudderingly; and to assure herself slid her hand under the blankets and felt his wrist. It was warm, and the pulse was beating faintly. Whilst she still knelt there, she heard Jervaux's voice behind her.

"Eef you will excuse me one leetle moment, mademoiselle." Looking round she saw he held in his hand a small enamelled mug from which steam arose, and as she stood upright the odour of pungent whisky assailed her nostrils. Jervaux smiled at her.

"We soon bring your father round. He haf fainted with the pain, you comprehend. But the spirit eet will heem stimulate."

She stood aside as the man bent over her father, and as she did so caught Pierre Georges' eyes fixed upon her in a calculating stare that brought a hot flush to her cheeks. She turned away from him; but was very conscious that he still continued to watch her, and she found herself wondering what was behind that dark mask of his face, for in the short time that she had been in the cabin she had realized he and Jervaux were birds of a feather and well acquainted with each other. She wondered further what would be the end of this calamitous adventure; and as she thought of that

dead trooper, lying in the snow far down the trail, killed by her father's pistol, she was almost overwhelmed by a sense of tragic disaster. A joyful exclamation from Jervaux recalled her to present facts, and leaning forward she saw her father's eyes open, and look round with a faintly wondering gaze. Then they closed again, and Jervaux whispered in her ear.

"Meester Carlowe weel be alright, mademoiselle. Eet is better not to disturb heem. Soon he weel sleep and after that he will be able to talk maybe."

Nancy Carlowe nodded and turning from her father faced the man who offered this consolation. Her beautiful face was very white, and the blue eyes were burning with anxiety; but her voice was quite steady as she spoke.

"I want to know exactly what happened," she said. "Tell me, Mr. Jervaux, tell me everything!"

The French-Canadian shrugged his shoulders. "Mademoiselle, I haf already told you that the mounter whom you saw shot your father in the shoulder; and that your father shot in turn and keeled him! What more ees there to tell?"

"I want to know why the mounted policeman shot at all. That is a little unusual, isn't it?"

Gaston Jervaux grinned as he replied, "Maybe! But, you see, Meester Carlowe obstructed de officer in performance of his duty."

"In what way?" she asked insistingly.

"Well, de mounter he haf words with your father and den he say that he must the sleds examine. Dat make Meester Carlowe mad; and

he say dat he will see de man damned first, an' draw the pistol. Maybe de mounter think he ees going to shoot; or maybe he think it better to scare us all; but he also draw his pistol and then before you can say Jackee Robinson they fire at one another once, an' both are hit, and——"

"There were three shots fired," broke in the girl. "I heard them."

At the words for one second an odd look came on Jervaux's face, then he smiled and shook his head. "Mademoiselle is mistaken. Two shots only were fired. There was not any need for three. Meester Carlowe he is a dandy man with a gun, an' he shoot true de firs' time."

Nancy Carlowe stared at him steadily, and for a brief time Jervaux's eyes flickered and wavered. She did not believe the man. The three shots were quite distinct in her memory of the incident; and as she decided the man was lying, she permitted herself to wonder why he should do so; but she gave no sign of her rejection of his statement. When she spoke again it was to ask another question.

"Why did my father object to the man examining the sleds?"

At that Jervaux laughed as if he found the inquiry amusing. "Because eet was whisky that he would haf looked for."

"Yes," she answered.

The man laughed again. "And if he had looked he would haf found eet, Mademoiselle Nanceey, which would haf been *très mauvais* for Meester

Carlowe and for me and you and all of us ; for the mounter would haf sent us all to Stoney Mountain."

"Stony Mountain?"

"Oui, mademoiselle? De penetentiary—you comprehend. They do not love whisky traders in Canada."

That she understood very well her face showed ; and Gaston Jervaux shrugged his shoulders and laughed again as she stood there, dumbly facing the certain knowledge of a thing that until then had been no more than a suspicion in her mind.

"Eet was a vaire narrow escape," he said. "But your father he shoot true, an' we are saved."

But the girl gave no sign of having heard him, and with another light laugh, Jervaux turned away, leaving the girl staring into vacancy, her blue eyes tragic with despair, her beautiful face a picture of misery and dismay.

CHAPTER X

AN ENCOUNTER ON THE TRAIL

AFTER leaving Jean Ladronne and the trooper, the trail that Clem Hardacre followed was one of extreme loneliness. Dark woods full of shadows ran down to the edge of the river, silent as death's self save when a gust of wind moaned through the tops of the timber or when some tree cracked in the bitter cold. Ahead was the snow surface, unbroken save by the trail that Jean and he had made the previous day, and at a turn of the river, through a fire-cleared space in the woods he caught the cold gleam of icy peaks towards which the trail seemed to lead. Besides himself and his dogs no living thing was visible in the Arctic wilderness, and so far as the hope of any human encounter was concerned it appeared that he might have been moving across some dead waste of the moon.

But Hardacre was scarcely conscious of the solitude or of the menace that seemed to brood in the frozen wild. Though he moved purposefully, he saw little of the waste, and gave little heed to the terrifying silence accentuated rather than diminished by the rare sounds already men-

tioned, and steadily broken only by the clicking of his own snow-shoes, the creaking of the dogs' harness, and the ring of the sled-runners when they came to a stretch of wind-swept ice. These things together made a friendly island of sound amid the vast intolerable sea of silence; but even of the relief that they afforded Clem Hardacre was unconscious as he moved on absorbed in his thoughts.

Somewhere ahead of him in the immeasurable wilderness of the North was the woman who next to Gaston Jervaux himself had done more than anyone else to turn his life awry and to wreck its earlier promise. Since the hour when that had happened he had seen nothing, heard nothing until last night when Trevor had told of his meeting with her, and now he was journeying to make the reckoning so long delayed. There was a hard light in his eyes that was evidence of the ruthlessness of his purpose, and once, as men will in solitude, he muttered his thoughts aloud.

"I will make her speak at all costs! Nothing shall prevent me knowing the truth."

He knew that the woman was fair; that men believed that her fairness had tempted him from the path of rectitude, and that he had been found by others of the Mounted Police drunk with his head pillowed in her lap; whilst her brother whom he was taking down to Regina as a prisoner was missing; but he knew also that the woman had been nothing to him, and that in some way he had been drugged and hocused. Men had not

believed his story. The Assistant-Commissioner had refused credence in the plainest terms, and in consequence until quite recently life had ceased to hold out to him any hope or promise. But those last had known revival with the coming of Nancy Carlowe into his life, and now even that was threatened by the unlawful activities of the man and woman whom he hated with a consuming hatred as the cause of his downfall.

He had, it was true, no sure proof that these two had anything to do with the introduction of the whisky of which Trevor had spoken. But an almost feminine intuition, backed by the knowledge of Jervaux's acquaintance with Jacob Carlowe, assured him that it was so ; whilst the certainty that he had been made a mere dupe by the latter filled him with a savage determination to know the truth at all costs, and to render the destroying activities of Carlowe and his unclean associates abortive.

Recalling the face of Nancy Carlowe, once he laughed harshly at the irony of the situation. For a moment the thought of the past faded from his mind, and he was absorbed by the future. Once he had learned the truth it would be necessary to deal faithfully with Jacob P. Carlowe. That the action he contemplated would draw upon him the latter's hatred and enmity, he had no doubt. The American was not the man to look tolerantly on anyone who thwarted his plans ; and it was possible that by the power of wealth, and the influence he could command, he might

be able to throw the whole onus of the whisky-running on the man whom he would desire to break, making him the scapegoat of his illegal activities; but Clem Hardacre did not let that risk count at all. If, as he suspected, Gaston Jervaux was involved in the underground trade of which the Mounted Police in the person of Trevor were already aware, it would make the situation more difficult for himself. Recalling the incident that had led to his own dismissal from the Force, men would smile cynically and shake their heads at any story that he would have to tell; but the consideration of that turned him from his purpose not a hair's breadth. If this new opportunity of clean and useful life at which he had grasped was to be fouled and made abortive, at least the vileness that fouled it should be dragged into the open and visited with retribution. That to do that, like Samson he must destroy himself and the beginnings that he had made in such strenuous endeavour, troubled him nothing; whilst the thought that he had been so easily duped was gall and wormwood to his spirit.

In one direction only did he see any hope of preserving the work that he had done. When he knew all the facts he could go to Carlowe with them and perhaps force him to discard Jervaux and Pierre Georges and the illegal traffic for which they stood. Carlowe had spent a very considerable sum on the posts already established, and in the preparations for widened activities in the coming Spring, and he would not care to sacrifice

it all for a gain which it would be possible to convince him was merely temporary and which in the end spelt ruin. It might be not too late to cut out the illegal traffic even yet. And in forcing that upon Jacob Carlowe he would have a strong ally in Nancy. She, at any rate, would back him in his clean purpose, and perhaps, if need arose, cut herself adrift from her father and throw in her lot with himself. But before that was possible, he must learn the truth, force it from Marie Jervaux, towards whom he was journeying, and then from Pierre Georges, who had found its contiguity to the Alaskan border one of the main attractions of the Black River post.

Thinking these thoughts, tortured now by the possibilities of utter disaster, and at other times clutching at the hope associated with Nancy Carlowe's sure allegiance to his own clean purpose, mile after mile he sped on; until a gust of wind full of driving snow crystals recalled him to the actualities of the present. Looking hastily up he saw that the patch of sky visible between the high lines of trees through which he sped was sullen with heavy greasy-looking clouds, big with the promise of snow. The day had grown visibly darker and the deep shadows of the woods more sombre and tomb-like. In addition the silence of the wilderness had disappeared and there was a moaning in the tree-tops that drowned the small sounds born of his own hurried progress. He knew the signs and was conscious of exasperation at the delay that promised. A storm was coming,

and the clouds overhead were heavy with snow.

Not for a moment, however, did he check his pace; though now and again the dogs whined uneasily. Soon, as he knew, he must be driven to camp; and once the storm really broke he might be held up for days, but until absolute necessity drove him, he was determined to make no halt.

Several times the increasing gusts brought the snow, yet still he kept on. The moaning from the woods changed to something very like a shrieking; the silent world of the North was now filled with menacing sound, and the tree-tops shook like corn before the hurrying wind, but he did not turn aside until the snow came in a blinding cloud that not only made travel impossible, but that made even the attempt the most perilous chance that a man can take upon the trail.

Then he swung the team towards the bank, looking for a place to camp, and quite suddenly, in the shelter of a creek running into the main river, came on a small camp. Through the driving snow he saw the gleam of the camp fire, and even through the storm there reached him the most pungent of all camp odours—the smell of frying bacon. His dogs yelped joyfully, there was a rush of furry forms as the big huskies of the campers flung themselves on his team, and with clubbed whipstock he stood to drive them back; and a moment later through the increasing snow-smother became aware of two men regarding him with lowering eyes. In the first sharp glance he summed them up. One was a half-breed of quite villainous

countenance and the other an Indian, sullen-faced and cross-eyed.

"Bonjour!" he shouted in greeting, and even as he spoke the words recalled Trevor's description of the two men who had been with Marie Jervaux.

"Bo'-jour, m'sieu'," replied the half-breed in a voice that had no hint of welcome in it.

Clem Hardacre disregarded the lack of cordiality and invited himself to their camp.

"I'll join up with you if you don't mind. There's no sense in the labour of two camps when one will do."

"As m'sieu' likes," answered the half-breed, still without cordiality, whilst the Indian without sparing another glance, gave his attention to the bacon. Hardacre smiled to himself and began to unharness his dogs. Whilst he was so engaged his eyes roamed round the little camp for any sign of Marie Jervaux's presence. He found none. The two men were plainly alone, and as plainly, like himself, had been driven to camp by the storm. But he had seen no signs of them on the trail that he had followed; and if they had been moving in the same direction as himself, he must have seen them, since for hours he must have been at their heels. The natural deduction was that they had been travelling in the contrary direction—from the point where Trevor had met the woman and her two companions, whose description fitted these two like a glove.

These facts gave him food for thought. The trails of the outer places were not so crowded with men that there was any likelihood of two pairs of such men being found within a couple of days' trail of each other; and as he worked he was driven irresistibly to the conclusion that these two men were identical with those whom Trevor had passed. But where was Marie Jervaux?

Whilst he worked, and whilst he cooked a meal for himself, his mind was much exercised by this question; and when later he crouched by the fire smoking. Neither the *métis* nor the Indian showed any disposition to talk; but left him severely to himself; though now and again he caught them regarding him with furtive eyes. As he sat there the conviction was forced upon him that the two men were ill at ease, and resentful of his presence because they were afraid of him. Why?

Scarcely had he asked himself the question when the answer leaped to his mind. They had been with Marie Jervaux, probably in the capacity of guides, and had deserted her, possibly had robbed her, even killed her. The last thought woke something very like consternation within him; for it meant the utter disappearance of a source of information on which he was relying. As it occurred to him he turned and regarded the pair steadily. The Indian staring at the fire, smoked on stolidly without moving; but the half-breed shifted uneasily under his gaze. Suddenly he asked a question,

"There is a white woman somewhere up the river—have you seen her?"

"Non!" grunted the *métis*, whilst the Indian's eyes lifted and glared at him crookedly and malevolently.

Hardacre was not discouraged. He knew that it was the nature of the *métis* to lie, and that if the circumstances were anything like he suspected them to be, the very last thing to be expected of the scoundrels was an admission of the truth.

"There were two men with her," he said casually. "One of the riders of the North told me about them and her."

The half-breed grunted again, what Hardacre had no notion, whilst the Indian resumed his stolid stare at the fire. Hardacre waited a moment, then he asked casually:

"Perhaps you have crossed their trail somewhere?"

"Non!" said the half-breed with sullen emphasis. Hardacre fell silent again, and tried to think out some plan for learning the truth. He could think of nothing, however. The silent sullenness of the *métis* and the racial taciturnity of the Indian baffled him utterly, since saying nothing they did nothing to betray themselves. And presently, whilst his mind was still busy with the problem, the two men, wrapping themselves in rabbit-skin blankets, laid down to sleep, and were further removed from betrayal of themselves than ever.

Sitting by the fire, he watched them carefully from the corners of his eyes. Whether they really

slept or not it was impossible to tell. Their lying down, their semblance of slumber might be no more than a ruse, and with that thought in his mind he refrained from the temptation to examine their belongings to see if there was anything there that would reveal the truth. He must wait until some action of theirs betrayed them, or until they were about to depart, and then force them to speak.

An hour passed, two hours, three, and still unmoving he crouched by the fire, whilst the storm continued, and the little drifts gathered about the figures of the apparently slumbering pair. But at the end of that time he knew that they were not slumbering, for one of the heads was cautiously raised, and for one fleeting second the breed's dark eyes encountered his own. The head was lowered instantly, and the man rolled over, as a man disturbed in his sleep will; but Hardacre knew that the two, so far from slumbering, were really on the watch, and he easily divined that they had taken fright at his questions.

Hour by hour he sat there, rising only to replenish the fire. The short day passed, and with its passing the storm blew itself out. Then he bestirred himself, and after preparing a meal was in the act of eating it, when again the half-breed opened his eyes, rolled over, and sat up yawning in the most natural manner possible.

"De storm she haf gone?" he asked, glancing at the stars overhead.

"Yes," answered Hardacre with a laugh. "I blew itself out an hour ago."

"Bon! Den we go also!"

He touched his companion with his foot, and the Indian sat up with quite surprising alacrity, and the two began to cook a meal, whilst Hardacre, watching for the opportunity he desired, continued his own preparations for departure. He had packed and lashed his sled, and was busy harnessing the dogs, when the opportunity was given in a most unexpected way. The *métis* was feeling for something in his pocket, and as he drew forth his hand he jerked out something which gleamed in the firelight before it fell into the snow almost at Hardacre's feet.

"Sacrebleu!" cried the half-breed, as Hardacre gathered it up preparatory to handing it to him.

It was a small gold locket, hanging on a fine chain such as many women wear constantly about their necks, and not at all the kind of thing for a rough half-breed to carry in his pocket on the trail, and Hardacre knew at last that his suspicion had been right; and that the two men had been with the woman whom he sought. But he gave no sign of his understanding as he handed the trinket to the half-breed, on whose face, as he received it, there was an uneasy look. With perfect self-possession he turned to his dogs again and resumed his task of harnessing them; but when he straightened himself and whirled round his pistol was in his hand.

"Hands up!" he said curtly.

The two men were taken completely by surprise;

and though the half-breed gave vent to an oath of surprise, both pairs of hands went up.

"Now," said Hardacre in the same curt tones, "where is Marie Jervaux?"

"Ah not know who you talk of," answered the half-breed sullenly, whilst the Indian maintained a stubborn silence.

"I give you whilst I count ten," answered Hardacre sharply, "and then I shall shoot, for I am convinced you have robbed her if not murdered her."

"We not keel——" began the *métis* protestingly, and then stopped suddenly.

Clem Hardacre laughed harshly. "Where is she, if you haven't killed her? She was with you, I know, for the mounter told me. Quick!" He began to count. "One! two! three! four! ——"

"She up river in de leetle tent," broke in the half-breed hurriedly.

"'Up river' is a wide term. You must be more precise than that, my friend. Whereabouts up river?"

"At de second creek, maybe twenty mile."

"Is she alone?"

"Oui, m'sieu'."

"And why did you leave her?"

"She sent us, m'sieu'."

Hardacre was so sure that the fellow had lied that he did not even trouble to say so. Instead he repeated his question:

"Why did you leave her?"

The pistol clicked menacingly as he cocked it, and the half-breed answered hurriedly :

"She vaire seeck !"

"And so you robbed and deserted her, you dirty scoundrels," said Hardacre, in a voice that was hoarse with wrath. He had no cause for any tenderness towards Marie Jervaux ; but he was appalled as he thought of what she must be enduring, deserted by her guides, perhaps without food or fire in the bitter weather. Then a thought occurred to him. "What is the sickness—*le mort rouge* ?"

He waited for the answer with some little anxiety, for, as he knew, the dread of smallpox which prevails in the North would drive better men than they were to the same base desertion.

"Non, m'sieu'," came the reply. "Eet ees de coughing sickness !"

"And you robbed and deserted her—you blackguards. You deserve to be shot out of hand."

He considered a moment, uncertain what to do. To take them back up river was almost an impossible task ; to let them go scot-free was an iniquity. Finally he broke silence.

"March !" he said sharply. "Straight across river." The half-breed looked at him with troubled eyes.

"What you goin' to do ? You not shoot ?"

"March !" he ordered again, peremptorily.

The half-breed began to move, sullenly, whilst the Indian remained where he was. Hardacre gave him his attention and in the second that

his eyes were lifted from the half-breed, the man leaped. Hardacre saw him coming and the pistol cracked on the instant. The half-breed screamed and stumbled into the snow, and as the Indian leaped in turn the white man drove the pistol in his face with all his might, and with a single grunt the native went down and lay still. Hardacre glanced at him to see that he was not shamming, then gave his attention to the half-breed. The latter was crawling through the snow towards the sled, where two rifles in snow jackets reposed; but on a word from Hardacre he stopped and looked round, his evil face twisted with wrath and pain.

"You haf my knee broken——" began the *métis* with a groan.

"You're fortunate that it is no worse, you scoundrel. Your friend will be able to look after you, when he revives."

A look of concern mingled with the pain in the half-breed's face.

"You leave us?" he asked quickly.

"Yes!"

"Sacre! Den Ah am dead mans. Tanket will me leave to freeze."

"As you left that woman up river," answered Hardacre ruthlessly. "I don't care what happens to you." The half-breed began to plead, but he might as well have addressed a rock. Walking to the sledge he removed the breech-bolts from the rifle and flung them into the wood, knowing that it would take the man some time to find

them ; then as the *métis* broke into a torrent of profanity, he gave his dogs the order to march, and started up the river to find Marie Jervaux, hoping against hope that she might yet be alive.

CHAPTER XI

GASTON JERVAUX'S PRICE

GASTON JERVAUX was disturbed beyond anything that was usual with him, and looked it.

"But are you vaire sure eet is so, Pierre. I tell you the man was dead as a rock."

"Eet ees the truth, Jervaux. Ah go to de place, an' de dead man he ees not there. An' hees dogs an' sled are not dere; an' anoder sled haf to de place been. Eet was written in de snow, an' de man who come he take de man whom M'sieu' Carlowe shoot away with heem."

"But why should he do that? One does not carry away carrion."

"Ah haf t'ink of dat!" answered Pierre Georges reflectively, "an' Ah t'ink dat maybe dat mounter ees not keel after all."

"If he wasn't then there is the devil to pay, Pierre. That mounter will come back, soon or late, to look for Carlowe."

Pierre Georges laughed. "What of dat, mon ami? As you haf say eet ees not your funeral. Eet ees M'sieu' Carlowe who weel haf de undertaker to pay."

"Yea! But eef that mounter come back too soon eet will my plan spoil."

Pierre Georges laughed. "We haf run for de border before, mon ami, you an' me, an' we know de way vaire well."

"Oui! But you do not understand, Pierre. This time when I go to the border I shall not go alone."

"You will take M'sieu' Carlowe wit' you, an' he ees a vaire seeck man? Ah comprehend."

Jervaux laughed harshly. "The mounters can take Carlowe for anything I care. I was thinking of another one, Pierre."

Black Georges looked through the open door of the stockade to where the lighted window of the post showed, and laughed his understanding. "You are of de leetle mademoiselle t'inking? But she not leave Carlowe. Dat ees de certain t'ing."

"No. I expect I shall have to take Carlowe also. One does not his father-in-law in the lurch leave."

Pierre Georges whistled and then laughed. "Ah not t'ink you want to marry her, Gaston. Dat ees not like you."

Gaston Jervaux laughed. "Carlowe is vaire rich; and the little Nanceey is——"

"Oui!" A calculating look came on Georges' dark face.

"Dat ees vaire good for you, mon ami, eef you can catch de bear, but Ah want to share de pelt."

Gaston Jervaux grinned affably. "I will pay you one thousand dollars, Pierre."

Georges shook his head. "Non! Ah want, un, deux, trois t'ousand dollars eef Ah help," he answered, counting on his fingers.

"Two, then!"

"Non! T'ree. For not a dollar less, mon ami, for as you say, Carlowe ees vaire reech mans; an' when you haf hees daughter marry you also weel be reech."

"Then three eet shall be."

"Bien! Now we talk. You tell me what you would haf me do."

They talked for some time, then, whilst Pierre Georges disappeared into the woods beyond the stockade, Jervaux entered the post.

Nancy Carlowe, looking pale and distressed, was bending over the bunk in which her father lay. The sick man was babbling deliriously of things which had nothing to do with the present; but every word of it, revealing her father's weakness, wrung the girl's heart. As Jervaux entered she looked up.

"He is no better," she said hopelessly.

"You must haf patience, mademoiselle. A day, two days, pouf! eet is nothing. Soon the fever will pass and M'sieu' Carlowe will begin the recovery."

"But are you sure, Mr. Jervaux?"

"I am quite sure. Just now eet is what you call the shock that M'sieu' Carlowe is suffering. The shock and the fever. But they will pass;

an' then your father weel get well. I know. I haf seen men like that b'fore. Eef not'ing happen, he weel be up and about in two weeks."

"But what may happen?" asked the girl anxiously.

Gaston Jervaux shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing, I hope, mademoiselle. But eef a new shock come, then eet might be dangerous for him, you comprehend."

"What sort of a shock?" Nancy demanded.

"Well, Mademoiselle Nanceey. I do not care to say eet. But, you see, M'sieu' Carlowe haf himself put the wrong side of the law; and eef the mounters find out what haf happened and come for him, then I think your father die."

"But there is no immediate fear of that, is there?" asked the girl quickly.

"I hope not, leetle one," replied Jervaux ingratiatingly. "I sent Pierre Georges yesterday to remove the evidence against your father, you understand. And to-day I expect he weel return. Then for a little time, M'sieu' Carlowe weel be quite safe."

"That is thoughtful of you," answered Nancy almost gratefully.

Jervaux laughed softly. "Eet is nothing, leetle mademoiselle. We must all hang together, you comprehend, an' there is much more that I would do to serve you."

The look in his eyes brought a sudden disquietude to Nancy Carlowe's heart. She had not forgotten how the man had kissed her in a moment of help-

lessness; and she was not blind to the fact that constantly he was thrusting upon her that what he did sprang from his devotion to her interests rather than his allegiance to her father; but for the moment she could not afford to offend this man, and so replied as casually as she could: "It is very good of you to say so, Mr. Jervaux."

As she spoke she turned towards the sick man, deliberately cutting short the conversation, and with a smile on his face Gaston Jervaux turned away. He understood quite well that Nancy Carlowe did not like him, and that his hinted devotion was distasteful to her; but he was not at all disturbed by the knowledge. Soon, as he was convinced, she would be only too anxious to avail herself of his devotion, and then, as he was amused to think, he would be able to exact his price. Still smiling he passed out of doors, but as he crossed the compound and walked through the open door of the stockade into the ghostly gloom, the smile gave place to a look of anxiety. The news that Pierre Georges had brought, whilst it might be used to serve his own purpose, was really very disturbing, and quite beyond his understanding. Why had the body of the dead mounter been carried away, and in heaven's name who had troubled to do the thing? A dead man was a dead man to be left to the wolves, at best to be given sepulchre in the spot where he died, and not to be made an added burden to the labour of the trail.

"Sacrebleu!" muttered Jervaux to himself as he wrestled with the problem as to who had so encumbered himself.

He stared thoughtfully down the long white trail of the frozen river. It was impossible that Pierre could have been mistaken, and the disappearance of the dead trooper was utterly inexplicable. The thought crossed his mind that Pierre, following some evil scheme of his own, might be misleading him; but only to be dismissed as it arose. Pierre Georges was a good tool in a skilful hand, but nothing more. He had not the mind to initiate any subtle scheme that would run counter to the interests of the man who used him and any thought to the contrary was quite out of the question. Then he remembered Mikaket's Indians. It was possible that one of them had found the dead trooper, perhaps annexed his dogs and his sled, and carried the body of their owner away to dispose of it secretly; but it was scarcely probable. No Indian would take the risk of being associated with the trooper's disappearance by being found in possession of his things. The men of the Mounted who disappeared on the wilderness trails did not pass out unnoticed. Sooner or later came other men following their trails, piecing together the facts concerning them, and in the end learning at least in the majority of cases their exact fate. The Indians knew this, and none would annex the possessions of one who had died a violent death, lest he himself should be held responsible and be called on to pay the

- penalty for a crime of which he was guiltless.
• Who then had done this odd thing?

He was still revolving the question when he caught the sound of Pierre Georges' voice cursing the dogs somewhere in the woods, and realizing that the man was returning, he hastily retreated to the living-room of the post again. There he seated himself near the stove, and lighting his pipe, smoked carelessly, waiting for the appearance of his confederate.

In the bunk at the far corner of the room, Jacob P. Carlowe babbled in intermittent delirium, and Nancy watched by his side, consumed by anxiety and worried by her inability to help him. As she sat there conscious of Jervaux's presence, her thoughts wandered to the suggestions that he had made in their recent conversation. Was there any fear that the thing which Jervaux had hinted at would come to pass, and that the Mounted Police would come to take her father? She shuddered at the thought, knowing what the end would be if her father was proved guilty of the death of the man who had been shot at the camp down the river. But whilst she shook with fear as she considered that possibility, she reviewed the position quite calmly, and decided that at any rate the event was not imminent. Having occurred in a district so remote, it was scarcely likely that the policeman's death would become known for some time; perhaps not before the spring; and long before that time her father would have left the country. As soon as he was fit to travel,

she would insist on Jervaux taking him out to St. Michael to comparative safety; for whilst she was greatly troubled as she thought of the momentary madness which had inspired her father to fire the fatal shot, she shuddered at the contemplation of the possible consequences of that insane act.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden clamour of dogs, mingled with the shouting of a man's hoarse voice. Jervaux rose swiftly to his feet.

"Pierre Georges!" he said laconically, and turned in the direction of the outer door.

Nancy herself looked that way, waiting for Georges' advent, and after a couple of minutes the black-visaged Canadian strode into the room, and broke into a very torrent of excited speech. He used the tongue of his native province; and though she caught a word here and there that she understood, he spoke so rapidly that it was quite impossible for her to catch the drift of what he was saying. But the look on the faces of the two men told her that Pierre Georges brought important news, and she waited with mounting anxiety to learn its nature. Black Georges finished speaking, and Jervaux snapped a question or two, then having received Pierre's answers he turned to her. The look on his face warned her that something wholly unexpected had occurred, and she cried out impulsively:

"Something has happened, Mr. Jervaux! What is it? Tell me quickly."

The look on Jervaux's face grew more portentous, but for a moment he did not speak, deliberately refraining in order to increase the girl's anxiety.

"Tell me," she cried. "There is bad news?"

"Vaire bad, Mademoiselle Nanceey," he answered at last, having achieved the effect he desired. "So bad that I do not like to say what _____,"

"Oh, man! don't beat about the bush," broke in Nancy, stamping her moccasined foot. "Out with it."

Thus adjured Gaston Jervaux came to the point. "Eet is that dam' mounter whom your father shot. I send Pierre to find heem and slip him through the ice so that he weel not be found, you understand?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Nancy. "Get on, man."

"Well, that Pierre he go to the place where the policeman should be and he cannot find heem."

"Cannot find him!"

As she echoed the words a look of amazement came on Nancy Carlowe's face, then she cried with a note of hope in her voice: "You mean that he had gone away—that he was not dead after all?"

"I did not say that," answered Jervaux quietly. "I say that Pierre cannot find heem, but that does not mean that he was not keeled. I know he was, for I saw heem lying dead een the

snow, as you did yourself, Mademoiselle Nanceey."

Nancy recalled the still white face on which she had looked in that tragic moment when she had seen her father standing with the smoking pistol in his hand, and the new-kindled hope died out almost as quickly as it had been born.

"Then what does it mean?" she whispered tragically. "A dead man cannot hide himself."

"Non! That is sure, and that is what Pierre Georges think, so he make examination, and he find that some one haf been to the camp, some one who haf dogs and that he take away the dead man into the wood. Pierre follow the trail to the place where that unknown man make camp, and he see that the trail still run on to the North; then he came back with the news."

"But why should anyone trouble to carry away a dead man?" asked the girl, her mind clutching again at the hope which had so recently kindled.

"I do not know for certain," answered Jervaux, a thoughtful look on his face. "But I think that maybe there was another mounter, that he came to the camp on the trail of his comrade, and carry heem away to a place where he can make sure of finding heem."

"You really think that?"

"Oui, mademoiselle! And I think further, as does Pierre Georges, that maybe the second man go to find help and that presently he weel come back to find and take the man that haf keel his comrade."

"Oh," cried the girl in anguish, "we must not let him do that. It will kill my father, as you said."

"And eef eet does not, then those mounters they will hang heem! That is their way. They are strange men who are not to be bought with money. They would hang the President of the United States eef they catch heem after he haf keeled a man in the Territories."

Nancy Carlowe had no thought that Jervaux was deliberately playing upon her fears. She knew the reputation for incorruptibility enjoyed by the North-West Mounted Police, and she accepted the man's statement for the mere fact that it was on the face of it. But her fears mounted proportionately with the conviction that the Law-bringers of the North would surely do their duty without fear or favour, and she cried in anguish: "Mr. Jervaux, my father must not be taken. We must save him somehow. Get him away from here—anything rather than that he should fall into the hands of the Mounted Police."

Gaston Jervaux looked in the direction of the bunk where Carlowe still babbled deliriously, and shrugged his shoulders.

"What es there that we can do, mademoiselle? Eef we move your father now, he weel die, swiftly. A fevered man cannot be taken out into the so great cold and vile."

"But if the Mounted Police come here and find him," exclaimed the girl helplessly.

"Then they weel nurse heem very tenderly

Always they are careful of the seeck, but most careful of all of a man whom they mean to hang by the neck till he is dead. That is their custom ; so careful are they that the law shall be what you call vindicated. Eef they come b'fore M'sieu' Carlowe can be moved there is no hope unless ——” He broke off, hesitated, and did not resume.

“ Unless what ? ” demanded the girl.

“ Unless Pierre Georges and myself take the strong measures.”

“ Strong measures. What do you mean ? Speak plainly.”

“ Well, mademoiselle, eet is like this. There weel not come many mounters to the post, perhaps only one, at the most two, for they are daring men those policemen. I haf seen one walk into an Indian encampment and take out the chief, when all the tribe was vaire angry, just boiling to keel the man who dared to do the thing because he haf the law behind him, and that man do that brave thing without taking out his pistol. So here there weel come one, two maybe as I say, and here are Pierre and myself—with rifles ——”

“ Oh,” cried the girl shudderingly. “ You mean that you would kill them ? ”

“ I mean that so we save your father.”

“ No ! ” exclaimed the girl emphatically. “ I will not have him saved by further crime. If that is the only way then he must die.”

Gaston Jervaux shrugged his shoulders once

more, then a calculating look came in his dark eyes as he stood there quite plainly revolving something in his mind. The girl waited, her eyes burning, her face tense with anxiety, and after an interval the man spoke again.

"That way may be vaire simple. The mounters come to take your father that they may hang heem, and instead, Pierre and I we shoot _____"

"No!" broke in the girl. "I will not have it. I will not listen to the suggestion. It would be murder."

"Eet would be the chance of the game which the mounters play with their lives and the lives of others for the stake," answered Jervaux self-excusingly, "but eef mademoiselle weel not haf eet so then perhaps another way might be found."

"What way?"

"Well, eet is possible that another might the blame take, and so save your father."

Nancy Carlowe started as the suggestion was made, and her blue eyes grew bright with hope. "You think that is possible?"

"Eet would be easy eef the man can be found. Consider, Mademoiselle Nanceey. There are but four people who know that your father keel that man. You, myself and the two Indians. About them there is not any need to trouble at all. They weel be silent as the dead mounter heemself, for they do not love trouble with the police. You are not likely to tell the mounters when they come that eet is your father who made the keel,

and I can be as secret as the North eef there is need, as now."

"Then you think the Mounted men will not learn the truth if they come?"

"They weel come, that is the sure thing. The trail that we make coming here weel bring them straight to the door, for the winter snow is a great betrayer. They are vaire clevoire and they weel read the signs written een the snow where we camp, then they weel come straight here, for they weel know that some one who was at that camp keel their comrade; but they weel not know which of us do the thing, and neither the dead mounter nor the signs in the snow can tell them that. Eet might be—pardon, mademoiselle—eet might be you, or me, or M'sieu' Carlowe or one of the Indians. They weel suspect all until they know; but eef one act suspiciously and run away, then he weel the blame get, and eef you say he is the man that shoot, then the police go after heem, and your father escape."

"You forget!" said the girl. "My father was shot."

"That was one beeg mistake," answered Jervaux with a cunning smile. "Your father he was vaire angry when the trouble came and he get between the Mounted policeman and the man who made the keel and so was accidentally shot. That is as simple as the daylight."

Nancy Carlowe considered. The scheme was certainly a feasible one, and with a little effort might be carried through successfully. Carefully

she considered the pros and cons and was so long over it, that finally Gaston Jervaux broke in upon her thoughts a trifle impatiently.

"What do you think, mademoiselle?"

"It might be done," she conceded. "But who would take the blame for my father's action and risk the chance of death involved."

"I!" said Jervaux, drawing himself up with the air of a hero. "I would face the risk—for the sake of you, mademoiselle."

Nancy Carlowe was not deceived by his gesture of magnificent generosity, and she inquired coldly: "At a price, I suppose?"

Gaston Jervaux bowed. "You haf discernment, mademoiselle. As you say, at a price. The wise man does not hees neck risk for nothing."

"I have no doubt that my father will pay you well for the service," answered the girl quietly, "and I shall be prepared to act in his stead and give you a bond for the amount you may require; and I will promise you that my father will honour it."

"That is vaire good of you, mademoiselle, but you are making the mistake. Eet is natural that you should think of money, being your father's daughter, but I . . . I think of a greater thing, that even money weel not buy."

"And what is that?" asked the girl shortly, with a sickening foreboding of what the answer would be.

"Eet is yourself, Mademoiselle Nanceey. That

is the price I demand for the great reesk. You give your hand to me and I save your father's neck."

"I will not," cried the girl passionately.

A little gleam came in the Canadian's eyes, and his face perceptibly hardened, as he inquired: "Then sooner you would your father should die?"

"Yes! yes!" she answered stormily.

"But consider, eet is not the death that is natural for a man," replied Jervaux suavely. "Eet is the disgrace. Always weel men remember, and to swing at the end of a rope——"

"Oh, hush!" cried the girl. "You are crazy to think that I——"

"Non! Eet is you who are crazed to think that a man weel take so great a risk without the payment, mademoiselle."

"You shall have payment—a fortune if you like. Money to go where you like, to become a *seigneur* in your own province, to——"

"Mademoiselle, I weel not talk of money. Eet is a question of life, and if for the life I risk I ask what seems to you so great a price, eet is I who take the risk and haf the setting of the price. You weel think eet over, talk with your father when the fever leaves heem and then——"

"Never!" cried Nancy, in helpless indignation. "Never!"

"Nevaire!" Gaston Jervaux laughed, as he turned towards the door. "That is a vaire long

time, and eef the mounters come queeck, then M'sieu' Carlowe he weel die."

And with that he passed from the room, leaving the girl crushed by a sense of impending horror that filled her with despair.

CHAPTER XII

A TERRIBLE SITUATION

BETWEEN the silent woods, up the white river trail heavy with the new-fallen snow, Clem Hardacre trudged ahead of his dogs, breaking the way for them. The black thoughts that had been in his mind when he had parted from Jean Ladronne and the policeman were blacker now, as he reflected that, after all, his endeavour might prove to be vain. Marie Jervaux was one of two people in the world who knew the truth of his downfall, and if he arrived too late to make her speak, then there remained only Gaston Jervaux himself; and that he could be made to tell the truth was more than problematical.

His one hope was that he would find the woman alive, and he pushed on desperately, though haste as it is commonly understood was impossible. In the short time that the storm had lasted an almost incredible amount of snow had fallen, and as yet it was soft, without crust, and every yard involved an amount of muscle-work that was extremely exhausting. At each step his foot with the great webbed shoe sank deep in the yielding snow, and had to be lifted clear with

a straight knee lift that, continued for long, tried the muscles cruelly ; but engrossed in his thoughts he scarcely noticed the strain, toiling forward almost automatically until he reached a stretch of practically clear ice, along which it was possible to move with speed. With varying fortune he slaved on until, feeling the approach of an utter exhaustion against which it was impossible to fight, he stopped, lit a fire, fed his dogs, cooked himself a meal, and then rolled in his sleeping-bag and tried to sleep.

That, however, proved to be impossible, the tormenting thoughts in his mind inducing a wakefulness that not even his bodily tiredness could overcome. So with muscles and limbs relaxed he lay there within the warmth of the fire, wondering whether he would find Marie Jervaux, already a very sick woman, in the land of the living, or a frozen corpse whose spirit had carried with it into the silence the secret that he burned to know. He lay there until the stars were quenched in the wan daylight creeping over the tree-tops and along the silent river way, then, when the deep shadow of the woods had softened until he could discern the trunks of the nearer trees, he rose, and after another meal resumed his way.

About noon he passed the first of the creeks which the half-breed had mentioned, and calculated that he had marched fifteen of the twenty miles that lay between him and his destination. Five miles more and he would know whether his herculean toil had been in vain or not. An ice-

jam at that point delayed him well-nigh an hour, and the labour involved in getting the sled and its load to the farther side, following on his long endeavour, left him bone-tired and utterly weary, yet still he pushed forward in the failing daylight, determined to make no further halt until he reached the second creek near which Marie Jervaux's tent was pitched. Piled-up drifts obstructed his going, a second ice-jam further delayed him, and the short day was done and the ghostly gloom of the Arctic night had again fallen on the sombre woods and the river trail, when he struck a long stretch of glare-ice roughened by the frost. Here it was possible to move with speed, the surface offering good footing for both the dogs and himself, and calling on his reserves of strength, he moved forward at an amazing pace for so tired a man.

There was no wind, and over the brooding forest and the gleaming trail between the high banks hung a silence that was accentuated rather than broken by the sound of his own progress, which seemed a mere intrusion, the buzzing of a fly in the unearthly stillness of some vast tomb. But unexpectedly the silence was broken by a new sound—a faint far-away cry on a rising note that came quiveringly through the still air, prolonged itself for a full half minute and then died away. It was like the wail of a lost soul breaking the stillness with tremulous and fearful anguish, a cry to make men shudder, and yearn for the safety of the camp and the cheerful glow of the fire, a daunting sound to the man who hears it for the

first time without any understanding of it. But Clem Hardacre had heard it many times when in old days he had followed the trails of the North, and knowing its source, he was unmoved by it.

"Wolves!" he muttered to himself, and sped forward.

Several times the cry of the questing beasts sounded, and he was able to locate the sound as coming from up river, before it ceased as suddenly as it began, and the silence of the outer place fell once more upon the frozen world. Then quite suddenly as he swept round a bend of the river he caught sight of a fire glowing like a red star against the deep shadow of the forest.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated, as he slid into the grip of excited anticipation.

The woman was alive. That red glow in the darkness was proof of that. In half an hour he would be confronting her, and would force her to confession, whether she were sick or well.

"Gee! you beggars! Gee!" he cried to the tired dogs, and as his excitement communicated itself to them, the brutes responded wonderfully, and swept forward at a pace that compelled him to cling to the sled that he might keep up with them.

As the minutes passed and the glow of the fire became clearer, his excitement mounted almost to delirium. He had waited four years for the moment that was coming, yearned for it with the ardour of a strong man, suffered torments because it was delayed, and its imminence shook

him as perhaps nothing else in the world could do. Again and again he cried to his dogs, harshly, urgently, though they were travelling at a pace that if he had not been clinging to the sled must have left him far behind. He was panting with his exertions, though he was unaware of it; and, inhaling the bitter air with great gasps, was in danger of freezing his lungs, but even that peril was forgotten as he raced towards the fire which like a lode-star held his eyes and his thoughts to the exclusion of all other things.

Two hundred yards more and he would reach his bourne. In the shadow of the trees he could see the little tent, a grey blur in the darkness, and he stared eagerly for any sign of the woman whom he sought; but found none beyond those afforded by the tent and the fire. Suddenly, however, a dark form passed between himself and the fire, and for a moment was silhouetted there before it moved on. A second later another took its place.

"The wolves!" he muttered in fierce exultation. "They are walking in the death circle. The woman is there—and alive!"

More than once in his wilderness journeys he had seen some moose brought to bay, standing in the deep snow with the hungry wolves walking in a silent circle, waiting for the moment when the monarch of the northern woods should collapse, the moment to them to rush in and gorge themselves with living meat. Notwithstanding the fierce exultation in his heart, he shuddered as

he thought of Marie Jervaux's plight, sick—perhaps to death, deserted, alone in that frail tent with the hungry wolves waiting to make her their meat. Whilst these wolves had watched she must have endured agonies, and since no sound of shot had reached him she must either be defenceless or have given up all hope of life.

He did not cry out as he sped forward. He had no fear of wolves, which, except when the utter madness of hunger falls on them, are cowardly beasts. His dogs, however, gave tongue as they raced for the fire which, as their trail instinct told them, meant rest from their long labours; and as the sound of their yelping broke up the stillness, Hardacre saw furry forms leap past the fire, to be swallowed up in the darkness of the forest.

He swerved for the bank, and as the sled halted in the circle of the firelight, panting and gasping he ran forward to the tent, the flies of which were wide open to admit the heat of the fire. Then he halted sharply, checked by the sight that met his gaze.

Inside the tent, half hidden in a rabbit-skin robe as she sat on a baulk of wood, was a woman. The firelight fell full upon the haggard face which still retained much of its beauty, though the great dark eyes were sunken and the wasted cheeks hot with the flush of fever. The mouth which he remembered as being like a scarlet flower was pinched, and from one corner down to the chin was a dark stain, as of blood, which apparently the woman had not troubled to wipe away. The

eyes, which stared straight ahead unseeingly, were full of tragic woe, and to his horror he saw that there was a pistol in her hand. That she was in the grip of the madness of fear he did not doubt, and in the second which his swift glance took to apprise these things he cried out :

“ Marie Jervaux ! Marie Jervaux ! ”

“ Mon Dieu ! ” shouted the woman. “ Now I hear voices. ” Impulsively she lifted the pistol to her head, but in that same instant Clem Hardacre leaped forward, and jerked her arm. The pistol cracked, and the bullet tore its way through the canvas wall of the tent and went singing into the night, whilst the man wrenched the pistol from the wasted hand. As his touch fell on her, the woman staggered to her feet, and shaking like an aspen, stared at him with tragic eyes.

“ Nom de Dieu ! ” she whispered. “ You are real ! ”

“ Yes ! ” he answered, and in spite of what he had suffered through this woman’s action, there was a note of pity in his voice.

She stared at him dumbly for a moment, then her eyes wavered, passed beyond him and fixed themselves on the darkness outside the zone of the firelight, and again the madness of fear crept in them.

“ De wolves ! ” she whispered. “ They wait. I haf seen them. They—— ”

“ They’re gone ! ” he interrupted. “ They won’t trouble you now. You do not need to trouble
—— ”

"Gone!" she cried, and the mad light of terror faded away; whilst as they fixed themselves upon him a look of utter incredulity came in them. "You are M'sieu' Hardacre who——"

A sudden spasm of coughing interrupted the words, shaking her wasted form cruelly. She stood there, helpless in its grip, whilst he held her to save her from falling. So long did it last, so cruel was its hacking, that he feared something must give way; or that she must suffocate before her breath came back; but after a couple of minutes the spasm passed, and sobbing and gasping and more than half-dead she fell back in his arms. Very gently he lowered her to a bed of spruce boughs which filled one side of the tent, raised her shoulders and head by means of a half sack of beans which was lying near, and tucked the rabbit-skin robe about her. For a moment she lay with half-closed eyes, her chest heaving, her breath rattling noisily, then her breathing grew more regular and less noisy; and the dark eyes opened.

"De whiskee!" she whispered brokenly. "Eet ees de only t'ing. . . . Dere wrap in de parka."

He flung aside the fur parka and found an oblong tin with a screw stopper. A tin cup lay on the floor of the tent, and half-filling it with the raw spirit, he held it to the pinched mouth. She sipped it slowly for a little time, then pushed it from her.

"Merci!"

Her eyes closed again, and as her breathing grew more regular, Hardacre became aware of

the uneasy whine of his dogs outside, and remembered that they were still tethered to the sled, and unfed.

"You must excuse me for a moment," he said. "I must feed the dogs."

The dark eyes opened and a light of understanding flashed in them.

"Oui, m'sieu'!"

With that shaking whisper in his ears, Hardacre went outside. Mechanically he unharnessed and fed the dogs, and then chopped ice for the pan and set it on the fire to melt. The woman would need food, and he himself must eat, and glancing from time to time into the tent, he worked automatically, his mind busy with the situation in which he found himself. Towards the woman in the tent, now no flame of anger burned in his heart, only a great pity. Already, as he knew, the shadow of the Great Divide hung over her. It was but a matter of days, perhaps of hours, before she slipped beyond the Peak of Darkness into the unknown; and as he worked, as much for her as for himself, he was conscious of the strange irony which had brought him whom she had greatly injured to soothe her passing moments. Of himself, of the purpose that had brought him to her in these tragic circumstances, he scarcely thought at all.

A small thing revealed that. From his sled he took out a haunch of moose meat and a slab of bacon, and had hacked pieces into the frying-pan, and was in the act of setting the pan over

the fire, when he suddenly desisted. He had been with a man on the Churchill River five years ago who had suffered from frosted lungs, and remembered that when bacon was fried in that man's presence the pungent odour had so irritated the afflicted lungs as invariably to induce a fit of coughing. With a glance at the quiescent form of Marie Jervaux he swept the meat and bacon he had cut into a small iron pot, half filled it with ice and, throwing in a handful of beans, set it on the fire. The meal would take longer to cook, and might not be so appetising ; but it would not bring any irritation to those lacerated lungs.

When his preparations were completed, and the meal in trim, he stepped inside the tent again. As he did so the sick woman opened her eyes, looked at him thoughtfully a moment, and then her lips moved.

"How did you come to me? Eet was an accident perhaps?"

"No," he answered. "I met that mounted policeman who searched your camp two days ago. He told me you were up here."

"Ah remember. He searched de camp for whiskey ; but he not find it."

"And later I met those two men who were with you. From the policeman's description I guessed who they were, and I compelled them to tell me where you were."

"Dey are scoundrels," answered Marie Jervaux in a passionate whisper. "Dey steal everyt'ing, and den dey take de dogs and leave me to die."

"I guessed so much," said Hardacre, "though they would tell me little, and in the end I shot that villainous half-breed in the knee."

"In de knee, m'sieu'?" said the woman hoarsely. "Eet should haf been in de heart."

"He will never walk as other men do again," answered Hardacre. "Even if the Indian does not leave him to die as they both left you."

"Bon!" The comment came in a fierce whisper that revealed the intensity of the woman's hatred of the half-breed, and for a time she lay still, her eyes closed. But after an interval she spoke again. "And you came to my help, M'sieu' Hardacre, after all dat haf happened."

"I was afraid that I should find you dead," he answered evasively.

"Why?" she asked quickly. "You haf leetle cause to trouble over me, m'sieu'!"

He made no attempt to evade her direct question, realizing that frankness would serve him best. "I hoped to force you to tell the truth about what happened four years ago when I was taking your brother to Edmonton."

"To force me, m'sieu'?" The woman gave a laugh which brought on a sharp attack of coughing, during which he slipped to his knees and raised her in order to give relief, and when the attack had passed she spoke again: "You do not think to force me now, M'sieu' Clem?"

"No. I depend upon your kindness. To clear my name means much to me."

"Oui. Ah understand dat!" said the woman

softly. She was silent for a moment, then she asked quickly: "You t'ink Ah going to die, M'sieu' Hardacre?"

Hardacre had no doubt of it; but he answered the question indirectly. "I am afraid you are very ill, Marie!"

"Ah going to die," replied Marie Jervaux insistently. "De *métis* an' de Indian dey know eet; an' dey leave me here all alone; de wolves know eet an' dey howl for my bones——" She broke off shudderingly. "Ah hear dem, and Ah see dem walk pass de fire! But you weel not let dem eat me when Ah am dead, M'sieu' Clem?" she ended imploringly. "You weel not?"

"No!" he answered. "Please do not let them distress you. They have gone away."

"Non!" she answered sharply. "Dey wait! Dey watch out dere in de darkness, for dey know."

She jerked a hand forward as she spoke, and, turning quickly in the darkness beyond the fire he caught sight of two sets of glowing points of light; and knew that they were the eyes of watching wolves. He gave an exclamation of annoyance, and springing to his feet, plucked a blazing band from the fire, and rushed towards the watching wolves. They retreated before him; but presently, when he was back in the tent, he saw them return to their old positions, and knew that indeed it was the death watch that they kept.

For a time the conversation was not resumed; and Clem Hardacre busied himself with the meal he was cooking; and when it was ready he per-

suaded the stricken woman to drink a little of the soup, and later half a mug of strong coffee laced with the whisky on which she had come to depend. The two together braced her a little, and she sat upright with an apparent strength that amazed him, though the hectic flush in her cheeks and the fevered glitter of her eyes with her rattling breath told him that this appearance of strength was wholly fictitious. She looked at him almost tenderly.

"M'sieu' Clem," she whispered. "You are vaire good to me. Ah not deserve eet!"

"I am doing what I can," he said simply.

"And dat ees much, but eet weel not avail to save me. Ah know!"

He did not contradict her, and some instinct warned him not to mention what was so near his heart. Instead he asked quietly: "Why did you come up here in the dead of winter, Marie? It is no place for a woman."

"For some women, non!" she laughed a little harshly; "but me, Ah am used to de cold, and Ah not t'ink to hurt. So Ah come North to help Gaston, as in de old days; but Ah freeze my lungs and de trouble grow, and Ah am hurrying to warn Gaston when those *canaille* leave me to die——"

"Gaston is up here then?" For the life of him Hardacre could not hide his interest; but the woman appeared not to notice the keenness in his voice.

"Oui!" she answered carelessly. "At de old

tricks, you understand. But de police haf got wind of heem, and Ah was going to tell heem ; but now—Ah not go."

"No," he replied, wondering how much she knew ; but not daring to question her.

After a little pause Marie Jervaux resumed. "Gaston ees careless. He takes de risks too easily. But dis time he ees playing for a greater stake than de money dat come from the whiskee!"

"Is that so?" asked Hardacre, in the most careless tone that he could assume.

"Oui! De man for whom he ees working ees vaire rich, and a fool, or so Gaston says ; and he haf a daughter whom Gaston t'ink he will marry——"

"God in Heaven!" cried Hardacre, moved out of his self-possession by the revelation of Jervaux's plans.

The sick woman glanced at him sharply. "What ees eet?" she asked. "Why do you speak like dat?"

"I am wondering if I know the lady whom your brother is proposing to marry."

"Maybe!" replied Marie Jervaux carelessly, though under the lowered lids the sunken eyes watched him keenly. "She ees de daughter of M'sieu' Carlowe."

Clem Hardacre did not speak ; but there was a look on his face that told more than words could have done ; and there was something almost terrible in his silence.

"You do know her, M'sieu' Hardacre?" inquired the sick woman softly.

" Yes ! "

The word was like the snap of a pistol, and again the dark eyes searched his face keenly. Then a whimsical smile played on the worn face. " You not like to t'ink dat Gaston weel de leetle mademoiselle marry ? "

" I will kill him if he does," answered Hardacre between shut teeth.

" Ah ! You t'ink you weel yourself marry her ? You lofe her ? "

" Yes ! " he answered again.

For a little space the woman was silent again. Quite plainly she was revolving something in her mind ; and as plainly was uncertain what course to pursue. Hardacre divined this ; and though he was burning to ask questions he held his peace. Then Marie spoke again, softly.

" M'sieu' ? "

" Yes ? "

" Ah did you much harm four years ago."

" More than you can possibly guess," he answered.

" And yet you are kind to me—you who were so vaire hard when Ah beg you to let Gaston go, dat de mounters might not hang heem."

" You do not understand, Marie. It was a matter of duty with me ! "

" An' de pride of de hunter when he haf a great keel made ! "

" A little, perhaps. Your brother was badly wanted, you know."

" Oui. Ah know dat ; an' you were de man to take him."

"He had his chance, and he tried to shoot me."

"Ah know." There was a further pause, and it was followed by a question that revealed to him the direction of her thoughts. "Eef Gaston marry Mademoiselle Carlowe eet weel be another great wrong to you?"

"No. To Nancy Carlowe!"

"You lofe her so much dat you do not t'ink of yourself?"

"I would die to save her from your brother."

The sick woman gave a little laugh. "You are not complimentary to my brother, m'sieu'; but Ah understand. De raven should not mate with de snow-white bird." For a moment she stared forth across the firelight into the darkness where again the twin points of light were glowing; and she gave a little shudder. Then she whispered brokenly: "M'sieu' Hardacre—eef Ah tell you something . . . you weel not leave me to de wolves."

"I shall not do that in any case!" he answered quietly.

"You swear eet by de Mass?"

"If you wish, but there is no need."

"Den Ah weel tell you. M'sieu' Hardacre, dat leetle girl whom you so lofe she ees up here in de North with Gaston and her father."

"What?" Clem Hardacre rose sharply to his feet, as he cried the word; then the possible explanation of her words came to him. "You mean they are at St. Michael, of course!"

"Non!" she answered, knowing what she risked in giving the information. "Ah mean she ees

here in de Territory makin' for de post on Black River, with Gaston an' M'sieu' Carlowe."

A wild look came in Hardacre's eyes as he received the news. His mind worked rapidly, and as he thought of Jervaux's scheme as set forth by his sister, and the possibilities which such a journey offered for nefarious action, a terrible look came on his face ; whilst a single whispered word broke from him :

" God ! "

His look, his whole manner frightened the woman. She had taken a risk, and the hazard had gone against her.

" Now that Ah haf told—you weel go away," she wailed suddenly. " You weel leave me to de wolves an——"

A sharp spasm of coughing cut short her despairing cry. It shook her terribly, but for a moment Clem Hardacre stood staring forth into the darkness visioning dreadful possibilities, and regarding her not at all, until a choking cry came from her, and her hands clutched at him frantically. Then recalled to the duty of the moment, he fell to his knees, and lifted her shoulders, and as he did so, a little gush of scarlet blood came from the wasted lips. He wiped it away with a hand that was tender as a woman's, then the stricken woman's head fell back against his shoulder, and as a moaning cry came from her lips, the dark eyes closed. Very gently he laid her down ; and knelt, regarding her, wondering if she were dead. A moment later he knew that she still lived ; and as he knelt there,

in the wasted lineaments he traced the likeness to her brother ; who, whilst the claims of humanity held himself anchored in this tragic service, was perhaps putting into actual execution the nefarious scheme that this dying woman had revealed. He shook with wrathful fear as he considered the possibilities. Then suddenly he rose to his feet and strode to the tent door. In the firelight his sled was standing, and one by one he picked out the sleeping places of his dogs. Why should he remain here by the side of a dying woman, when down the river peril threatened Nancy Carlowe from a man whom he hated with consuming hatred ? He had given his word to Marie Jervaux, but that word had been won from him by a trick, and no man in his senses would hold it binding.

In the grip of temptation he stepped out into the snow, and moved towards the sled. As he did so, out there in the darkness he caught a sound of padded feet in the snow and the gleam of fierce eyes, and knew that the wolves still watched this camp of death. With that knowledge there came a sudden revulsion of feeling. After all, the sick woman had played the game. She had told when she need not have told ; given him precious information which she might have withheld ; and on his bare word had taken the risk of his deserting her. It was his turn now to take risks, and for a moment he stood staring into the darkness, torn between the desire to run away down river, and the humane duty to stay. The battle was a fierce one whilst it lasted, but it was cut short by a weak despairing

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wail from the sick woman ; and in a second the resolution was taken ; and, his face hard and set, he turned on his heel and re-entered the little tent.

CHAPTER XIII

A RESURRECTION

“SO, Mademoiselle, you haf talked with your father, an’ to save hees neck you become my wife, Ah understand?”

As Gaston Jervaux spoke he smiled like a man well pleased, but as he looked into Nancy Carlowe’s white set face he knew that here was one who loathed him.

“On my father’s terms—yes.”

“An dose are dat immediately after de ceremony Ah run away, dat the mounters may follow me, an’ dat Ah do not see you again until we meet at St. Michael?”

“Yes!” answered the girl stonily.

“By gar!” cried Jervaux, “you ask much from a man, you an’ your father! How eef Ah demand dat my bride come with me?”

“Then there will be no bride to go,” answered the girl steadily. “My father will take the risk of leaving the post at once.”

“He weel die, surely, eef he do that,” said Jervaux quickly. “Dis great cold and de so long journey eet weel finish him.”

“All the same, the risk will be taken.”

"Sacre!" whispered the man under his breath as he noted the resolute lines of her face. Then he smiled. "An' eef Ah go, Mademoiselle Nanceey, and we meet at St. Michael, what den?"

"Then we can talk things over quietly, and settle the future."

"Talk!" Gaston Jervaux laughed sharply; but his dark eyes blazed. "Talk!" he repeated. "You t'ink Ah not understand, dat Ah not know you haf de hope dat de marriage weel be vaire easily dissolved; but Ah also haf thought of dat, mademoiselle; an' none but a priest of de church shall us marry, for such a marriage ees beyond dissolution."

"Where will you find your priest in this wilderness?" asked Nancy, with a glance round the snow-covered waste.

Gaston Jervaux laughed cheerfully. "Holy fathers do not grow on every bush you would say, mademoiselle; an' dat ees true; but dis vaire mornin' one arrive at old Mikaket's camp, so dere is one difficulty removed, eet es what you call providential."

The look on Nancy Carlowe's face showed that she did not so regard it. Since first Jervaux had mooted his scheme for taking the blame of her father's crime upon himself on the condition that she became his wife, she had given the matter much thought, and had played for delay in the hope that it might be possible to save both her father and herself by hurrying him across the border. But in the three days that had passed that hope had slowly faded. It was true that

her father was no longer delirious, and was able to discuss the situation ; but he was in no condition to be moved ; and, as he shrank from facing the consequences of his rash act, he had devised a scheme which would serve his own salvation without any real sacrifice of his daughter.

"Marry the scoundrel, Nance. In the long run it's cash he wants ; and when we get to St. Michael I'll buy him off. A marriage in this hole of a place will be easy to annul. It isn't as if—as if it were to be a real wedding with—er—with a honeymoon to follow."

For long Nancy Carlowe had fought against the idea, having reasons that her father never dreamt of. As she stared into the glowing stove or took exercise along the edge of the gloomy wood outside, constantly the thought of Clem Hardacre came to her mind. He had said that he would live for "journeys end," but if when he reached St. Michael he heard that she had married a man whom he hated, she was convinced that she would see him no more for ever. And he would be justified unless he knew the facts, and who was to tell him what had happened ? Perhaps if he learned the truth he would take the law into his own hands, and kill Gaston Jervaux, as he was capable of doing when wrath was his predominant emotion. But that would mean further trouble ; and she shrank from that possibility even as much as from this evil marriage. And as the slow hours passed, and it became increasingly apparent that there was no hope of her father being sufficiently well to remove

for some time, the necessity for the step which was loathsome to her even in contemplation forced itself upon her. With every hour that passed her father's peril increased. If the Mounted Police came to the cabin whilst Jervaux was actually there, it was not likely that he would take the guilt of her father's action upon himself when there was no chance to win clear. So at last she had been driven to fall in with Jervaux's demand and her father's plan, though with a secret hope that a binding marriage would be impossible for lack of the necessary official.

She had not known of the arrival of the priest at the Indian encampment until Jervaux informed her of the fact ; and on hearing the news the first emotion was one of startled dismay.

"Are you sure?" she cried. "Who is the man?"

"Père Grouard. A good man and a great traveller."

He named a famous missionary priest of the North of whom Nancy Carlowe had heard stories told at St. Michael, and for a moment the thought crossed her mind that perhaps the Jesuit could help her. Then she dismissed it. To secure the priest's advice she would have to tell him the whole story, and from that she shrank, since that meant that one more person must have the knowledge of her father's guilt, and utterly miserable at heart and beset on every side, she replied :

"As you say, a good man, I have heard of him."

"Then eef you agree, Ah send for him, and

to-day we will be married. Den an hour after —no half an hour after, Ah start to run away from de Mounted Police."

"Very well," said the girl stonily, and wearing a white set face turned towards the cabin, feeling that all light had gone out of her life.

And so it fell that three hours later Father Grouard, wondering greatly what was behind the union, married a white-faced, shrinking girl who made her responses in a toneless voice to a man whom he knew to be evil, and whom he held in little regard; and that done, departed on his way up river, to carry the last unction to a half-breed trapper's dying wife. And scarcely had the frost crystals begun to form in the trail he left, and whilst Gaston Jervaux was yet harnessing his dogs for the misleading flight, when fresh visitors arrived at the trading-post. They debouched suddenly out of the woods above the post, one man driving the dogs and the other lying on the sled; and hidden from view by the stockade, sped swiftly towards the post, reaching it unobserved.

Halting the sled in the shadow of the stockade itself, the driver helped his companion to his feet; steadied him for a moment, and then whispered: "Do you feel you can do eet, m'sieu'?"

"Yes! If you stand by me. Give me your arm and lead on, Ladronee."

The pair moved quietly round the stockade to the gateway which stood open. Gaston Jervaux happened at that moment to have entered the cabin, and the compound was empty. The two men

moved across it, and reached the closed door without having encountered anyone ; and Jean Ladronne, at a sign from his companion, rapped sharply with the stock of his whip upon the door.

Jean was no policeman, but just now he was acting for the law, and there was something peremptory in his raps which awakened startled consternation in the minds of those within.

" Mon Dieu ! " cried Jervaux in a hoarse whisper, " who is dat ? "

Pierre Georges, wide-eyed with wonder, shook his head, whilst Nancy, who had been sitting by her father's side with face buried in her hands, looked up with mingled fear and astonishment in her eyes.

Whilst all stood waiting in a frozen silence, the rap sounded again more peremptorily than before, and a whispered oath broke from Pierre Georges, whilst Jervaux slipped a pistol from his belt, gave a reckless laugh, and then cried : "*Entrez !*"

A hand fumbled at the latch-string, then the door opened, and Jean Ladronne entered the room. Jervaux laughed with sharp relief. " Ladronne of all men ! "

" Oui, M'sieu' Jervaux, and anoder wit' me ! "

He stepped aside as he spoke, and the girl remembering that Jean Ladronne had been on the trail with her lover, looked at the man behind him in agonized expectation. Then a great cry broke from her lips as she staggered to her feet ; and in the same moment Gaston Jervaux shouted in superstitious fear :

" Mon Dieu ! De dead Mounter ! "

"Hands up!" snapped the new-comer, whom both Jervaux and Nancy recognized as being the man whom they had seen lying white and still and apparently dead in the snow after Jacob P. Carlowe had fired upon him. As he stood there, pistol in hand, one hand against the wall to steady himself, his eyes fixed themselves upon Gaston Jervaux, who, as the command broke upon his ears, instantly recovered the paralysis of shocked surprise which seemed to have fallen upon him. He laughed harshly. His arms shot up; but on the ascent the pistol in his hand cracked, and the policeman reeled against the wall, his pistol dropping from his hand as he slowly collapsed. With a shout of rage Jean Ladronne sprang forward; but as he did so Pierre Georges felled him with a sledge-hammer blow; and with a laugh Jervaux sprang through the open door, and ran out to the compound, where his dogs stood waiting; and a moment later his harsh voice sounded through the extraordinary stillness which had fallen on the room.

"Mooch, Doc, Mooch!"

A whip cracked like a pistol shot, a dog yelped, and through the stillness sounded the swish of the runners in the snow; then Pierre Georges ran outside, and bawled something after the fleeing Jervaux. His going broke the spell which after her first cry had fallen on Nancy. With a sobbing cry, she ran across the cabin towards the fallen trooper whom she had believed to be dead, killed by her father's hand; and who had been resur-

rected too late to save her from the deplorable marriage. She fell on her knees by his side, and looked into his face to make sure that she had not made a mistake. And a second later she knew she had not. The features on which she looked were identical with those at which she had stared in horror in the midst of the snow-storm less than a week before.

With that assurance, like a flash of lightning the thought flashed through her mind, that after all her father had not killed the man; that the marriage she had entered into had been totally unnecessary. Sick with despair, she staggered to her feet, and then rested one hand against the cabin wall in order to keep herself from falling. As she did so, she caught sight of her father. He had lifted himself up in the bunk, and the red light of the stove revealed his pale face working with excitement. He pointed to the fallen trooper. "That man there, Nance?" he stammered excitedly. "He is that fellow whom I——"

His excitement checked his utterance, and the girl answered the unfinished question.

"Yes, he is the same man!"

"Then I guess I couldn't have killed him; and by G—d, that scoundrel Jervaux has sold us clean."

"It seems so," answered Nancy tonelessly.

With a groan Jacob Carlowe slid back in his bunk, and fearing for his life Nancy ran to him.

"Father! Father!" she cried in anguish, as she looked into his drawn face with its closed eyes.

The man made no response, indeed was for the time quite beyond it, his breath coming ster-torously, a purple flush mantling his cheeks.

She sobbed helplessly as she looked down at him. It was plain to her that some new physical evil had overtaken him, but she had no idea of its nature. Whilst she stood there torn with anguish and fear, she caught a sound of movement behind her and looked hastily round. Jean Ladronne, recovering from the stunning blow delivered by Black Georges, was just sitting up. He looked round dazedly, and as he did so his eyes fell on the Mounted Policeman lying in a crumpled heap by the cabin wall.

"By gar!" he exclaimed, as he staggered to his feet. "Dat devil Jervaux haf shoot heem, again!"

"Again!"

The word sang in Nancy's ears as she watched the voyageur move forward, a little uncertainly, and stoop over the injured man. The implication of it brought a great surge of relief to her burdened mind. Not only had her father been guiltless of murdering the mounted policeman, but he had been innocent also of the shot which had laid him in the snow in the pallid semblance of death. She did not understand how that had come to pass; but she knew now that her father had been mistaken; that Jervaux must have lied for his own ends; and that she had been trapped into a marriage by the man who, in intention at least, was twice guilty. Her own position

for the moment troubled her little. She was glad to know her father was innocent, and she turned to him with the thought of telling him the good news. But he lay as he had lain when the noise of Jean Ladronne's movement had arrested her attention; his visage empurpled, his eyes closed, his breath sounding noisily.

"Oh!" she whispered. "He is dying."

Ladronne, still bending over the man whom he had accompanied to the post, heard her. Straightening himself he moved to the bunk, and as he reached it, spoke.

"Dat Trevor, he ees keel dis time, for sure. God rest his soul. He was a vaire brave man!"

Then he looked down at Jacob P. Carlowe, and whistled softly.

"What is it?" asked the girl agonizingly. "Tell me! What has happened to my father? Do you know?"

Jean Ladronne nodded his head. "Ah t'ink Ah do! Twice haf Ah seen men like dat! He haf what you call de stroke. Somet'ing haf broke een de brain, a leetle blood-vessel, you comprehend, mademoiselle; and eet knock heem clean over."

"Will he die?" asked Nancy quickly.

"Ah not know! Both de two men whom Ah see dey get better after a few days; but one of dem haf a twisted face—so!" He drew up one corner of his mouth to illustrate, and then added, "Maybe M'sieu' Carlowe he not haf eet

very bad, maybe he be all righ' een a voire few days. But——"

The sound of the door opening made Jean Ladronne turn swiftly round. Black Georges was just re-entering the post, and as his eyes met those of the man whom he had knocked senseless, he grinned as if it had been a matter of small moment; then his eyes fell on the crumpled form of the Mounted policeman.

"Sacrebleu! He ees keel dead dis time?"

"Oui!" answered Jean Ladronne sharply.
"An' for dis dat Jervaux weel hang!"

Pierre Georges laughed. "Non! He haf gone away! De mounters weel not take heem. He travel fast to de border." He stopped, looked at the dead man again, and then asked shortly: "What for you bring dat fool here, Jean Ladronne?"

"Because he ask me, an' swear me into de force as a special constable."

"He swear you een?"

"Oui!"

Black Georges stood considering the matter for a moment, and then he asked, "Where did you find heem?"

"Ah find heem where he was left when Jervaux shoot him."

"Tiens! Eet was Gaston who shot him dat time?"

"Oui! So Trevor said; an' he haf written eet in his leetle book."

"We must dat book burn," said Black Georges sharply.

"Non!" replied Ladronne, moving towards the dead man. "Ah am a special constable; Ah haf de oath taken from Trevor, an' Ah take charge of de leetle book."

He stooped as he spoke, and keeping an eye on Georges, pulled open the dead man's parka, and thrusting his hand inside the blood-stained tunic, drew forth the constable's note-book, and transferred it to an inner pocket of his own.

Black Georges watched the operation beneath lowering brows, then he broke out stormily, "You want to haf Gaston hanged?"

"On de highest gallows dat ever was!" replied Jean cheerfully.

"But dat mus' not be," cried Georges wrathfully. "We must put dat carrion through the ice so dat no one find heem an' we must throw dat leetle book of records onto de stove."

Jean stooped quickly and picked up the dead man's pistol. Then he laughed harshly. "Non! Pierre. You make beeg mistake. Eef you t'row dat book into de stove, den you must t'row me also."

Black Georges looked at the pistol in the other's hand, and though he was shaking with rage, restrained himself by a great effort, and then asked sneeringly: "You would hang mademoiselle's husband? De boss he weel not t'ank you for dat!"

Jean Ladronne stared at him incredulously, and Georges laughed at his astonished look; then

the voyageur turned and glanced at Nancy Carlowe.

"Mademoiselle——" he began appealingly, and the girl broke in on the question that he would have asked.

"It is true, Jean. I was married to Gaston Jervaux this afternoon. But I do not care how soon he is hanged, and my father——"

She broke off sobbingly, and Jean Ladronne realized suddenly that strange things had happened at the little post of which he knew nothing.

"Mon Dieu!" he whispered, staring at her in amazement. "And M'sieu' Hardacre——"

"Where is he, Jean?" asked Nancy brokenly; "I thought he was with you."

"He was! But we do not know dat you are here, mademoiselle, and we do not know dat Gaston Jervaux ees here, either. And when we meet Trevor, dat ees de dead man, dere, he tell M'sieu' Clem about a woman who ees Jervaux's sister, and he go back to find her because dere ees a secret dat he wish to know, and which she can tell him, whilst he leave me to bring Trevor here, an'——"

"But you were not with that poor man when he was shot the first time?"

"Non! Ah am journeying with Trevor, you understand, and eet begin to snow; so Ah say dat we must make camp. But Trevor he weel not; because he ees in a beeg hurry to find who haf brought whiskee into de Territory; and so he mush on, whilst Ah make camp, for to travel

through de storm ees foolishness. But as soon as de storm blow out Ah follow, and Ah find Trevor less dan a mile away, lying in de snow, with hees dogs close up to heem. He haf been shot, but de dogs dey haf kept heem warm, so dat he haf not freeze, an' he tell me what haf happened; and Ah guess dat Jervaux haf heem shoot——"

"They said it was my father?"

"Non! Eet ees in de leetle book. Ah know, for Trevor tell me when he write eet. De man with de grey beard—dat ees M'sieu' Carlowe—he talk—angrily, and he haf hees pistol in ees hand, but eet ees de young white man who shoot. Trevor see heem in de act an' shoot at de same time at Jervaux who ees standing near your father, who also fire hees pistol, by accident, or as Trevor say because he was startled; and Trevor he fall and rememaire no more till Ah find heem. Dat ees the story in de leetle book, mademoiselle, and now Jervaux haf keeled de trooper for good; an' we haf witnessed eet, and weel heem hang, an——"

He broke off sharply, and with the pistol lifted faced Black Georges, who was in the act of leaping on him.

"Non, Pierre, dat weel not do. Eef you try dat game Ah shoot you dead, an' de Mounted Police dey weel not blame me, for Ah am one of them. An' eet ees best dat you play no tricks, for soon M'sieu' Hardacre he weel come, an' den you weel wish dat you haf behave."

An oath broke from Black Georges. "M'sieu'

Hardacre," he muttered, and stared rather wildly at Jean. "He come here?"

"Vaire soon."

"Sacrebleu!" cried Georges, and swinging sharply on his heel left the cabin.

As the door crashed behind him, Ladronne gave a little laugh and turned to the girl; to find that she was kneeling by her father's side, and apparently entirely oblivious of Black Georges' departure.

CHAPTER XIV

A WILDERNESS CONFESSIONAL

“SO you did not leave me, M’sieu’ Hardacre ? ”
As she spoke Marie Jervaux smiled weakly ;
and Hardacre answered her in a single word :

“ No ! ”

“ You are not afraid for Mademoiselle Carlowe,
maybe ? ”

“ I know your brother, Marie ; and I am very
much afraid.”

“ Mon Dieu ! ” whispered the sick woman
wonderingly, “ and yet you stay. M’sieu’, Ah am
ashamed dat Ah hurt you so long ago. Eef it
had not been for Gaston——”

She broke off, and though Clem Hardacre was
sorely tempted to ask her what had happened
when Gaston Jervaux had escaped, he held his
peace, hoping that soon she would tell him, and
a minute later the sick woman spoke.

“ M’sieu’ Hardacre,” she said, still whisper-
ingly. “ Ah weel tell you all. It ees vaire simple.
. . . When you take my brother after he haf
nearly keel the trader at Ford du Lac, Ah hear,
and Ah hurry after you, and follow you for nearly
two weeks t’inking Ah weel get heem away ; but

you watch so carefully till you come to dat road-house, where you are expecting other men to take him from you down to Edmonton, and where Ah also make stay. Your comrades dey haf not yet arrived, and Ah make appeal to you to let Gaston go ; but you laugh at me, though Ah promise you—so much ! But you did not know that de man at de road-house was a friend of Gaston——”

“ Big Ohlsen the Swede ! He was in it ? ” cried Hardacre in angry astonishment.

“ You did not t’ink of dat, m’sieu’ ? ”

“ I have wondered once or twice, but I never seriously considered it. Was he in the swim with your brother ? ”

“ He was one of Gaston’s men ; and he help to pass de whiskee along.”

“ Great heavens ! And we never dreamed it of him ! ”

“ For two years he had worked with Gaston ; and when you stop dere with my brother, and your comrades dey haf not arrived Ah know dat my chance ees come. So Ah make dat appeal, an’ those men who are seekin’ de gold dey hear ; an’ Beeg Ohlsen de Swede he wink at me ; and when we know dat your friends weel arrive in two or t’ree hours he give you de knock-out drop, and you fall asleep. Den Gaston run away, and because Beeg Ohlsen t’ink dat maybe your friends weel suspect, we arrange a leetle play ; and when dose other mounters come, dey find you with me—and you smell much of whiskee, so dat dey t’ink you are vaire drunk, and have let Gaston

go because . . . because of me, hees sister . . . comprenez-vous ? ”

“ Yes ! ” answered the man grimly. “ It is quite plain. ” Then he laughed harshly. “ And it was Ohlsen who gave me the knock-out drop ? ”

“ Een your coffee, m’sieu’ ! ”

“ And he’s still at the road-house, I guess ? ”

“ Oui, m’sieu’ ! ”

Clem Hardacre laughed again. “ In three months if I live he’ll leave it for Stony Mountain. ”

“ Dat ees de Penitentiary ? ”

“ Yes ! ”

There was silence for a little time, then Hardacre spoke again. “ Marie, I am going to write out all that you have told me, and I shall want you to sign it, if you will. It won’t make any difference to your brother—because the mounters have still the old charge against him—and it won’t hurt you——”

“ Non, m’sieu’, eet will not hurt me ; for Ah shall not leave any trail where Ah am going ! ”

“ The only one who will be hurt is Big Ohlsen, and he deserves it. You will sign ? It means much to me. ”

“ Write, m’sieu’ ! Ah will sign. ”

Hardacre took out his pocket-book, and began to write. He covered several pages, setting forth the story of his own downfall as the woman had told it ; and when he had finished he read over to her what he had written.

“ Dat is all right. Give me de pencil an’ I weel sign. ”

He gave her the pencil and the book, and she wrote her name, hesitated, and then added something to it. As she handed the book back to him, he looked at the signature and read what followed it.

"I am dying, and before Almighty God, and in hope of His mercy, I swear that this is true. M. J."

"Eet will help?" she asked.

"Yes! There is a certain presumption in law that the word of a dying person may be accepted as true or at any rate should have greater weight than when spoken in ordinary circumstances."

"Dat ees good! Eet will help much! Now Ah haf only got to die. . . . But Ah am forgetting. Dere ees one leetle t'ing. Ah am of de religion; an' Ah want absolution before Ah die."

Clem Hardacre stared at her in perplexity. "But there is no priest, Marie, not within two hundred miles."

"Dat does not matter. You, m'sieu'——"

"But I am no priest, Marie."

"You do not comprehend. Een an emergency anyone may say de absolution, m'sieu'!"

An uncomfortable look came on Hardacre's face, and he stood there dumb, obviously at a loss what to do. The woman's sunken eyes sought his imploringly.

"You weel not do eet, m'sieu'? Ees it dat you do not forgive de so great trouble dat Ah bring to you?"

"Good heavens! no, Marie. I forgive you freely, but you do not understand. . . . I . . . I ——" He broke off, and then as he caught the

look on the woman's face, he cried sharply: "Before God, I'm not fit to shrive you or anybody, Marie."

"Dat make no difference, m'sieu'! Dere ees no priest and so Ah make confession to you; an' you give me de absolution. Eet ees quite right to do so, m'sieu'."

"But I don't know the formula," said the man protestingly, knowing that he was clutching at a straw.

"Dat does not matter. When Ah haf make de confession, Ah tell you de words, an' you say dem, so dat Ah do not go unabsolved. You weel do eet, M'sieu' Hardacre? Remembraire dat Ah die vaire soon."

Recognizing that there was nothing else for him to do, and not daring to trust himself to speak, Clem Hardacre bowed his head in token of consent.

"Merci, m'sieu'," whispered the woman softly. There was a little pause, and then Marie began to speak, slowly, haltingly, and on the first words, recognizing that the confession was beginning, Clem Hardacre fell upon his knees and bowed his head. Slowly the confession proceeded, broken now and again with little spasms of coughing, and one great one in which he feared that she would choke, but as it passed, after a moment or two to recover breath, Marie went on in a hoarse, broken whisper that in the tremendous silence seemed quite loud. He tried to shut his ears to the secrets unfolded but could not, and perforce listened to the story of folly and weakness and downright evil, which, desperately seeking the peace that the

dying should have by right, the woman whispered from her tortured heart. It was a grim reckoning-up of a life's ledger, sordid and tragic and pitiful, and as it ended Clem Hardacre was crushed by "the sense of tears in mortal things"; and his hard blue eyes were so misty that he could scarcely see the haggard face lying on the bean-sack. Then her whisper reached him:

"Now, m'sieu'! De holy words!"

Slowly, solemnly she began to speak them, and he listened carefully; then caught up by something greater than himself, he declaimed the sonorous Latin almost as one having authority:

"*Miserátur vobis omnípotens Deus, et dimíssis peccátis vestris, perdúcat vos ad vitam ætérnam. Amen.*"

"*Indulgéntiam, absolutiónem, et remissiónem peccatórum tríbuat nobis omnípotens et mísericors Dóminus. Amen.*"

As he ended he remained with bowed head; conscious of a solemnity that held him still, and of which the great silence of the North seemed no more than the seal. Then the hush was broken by the woman's sobbing, and opening his eyes, he took her hand.

"Don't, Marie, don't! The good God——"

"Oui?" The sick woman prompted him as he broke off. "Le bon Dieu——"

"He made us! And . . . and I guess He can make allowances. I hope so, for we all need them pretty badly." He rose to his feet, and stumbled out of the tent. The great silence was on the

land. It brooded over the dark forest, the reach of snow visible in the greyness, and on the frozen river white between the high banks ; and it was broken only by the faint sound inside the little tent : the most desolate of all sounds, that of a woman weeping.

In his time he had heard women weep before, for themselves or for their dead. He had tried to comfort a woman whose husband he had carried in from the trail dead, and had stood by whilst she sobbed great tearless sobs ; he had heard the wailing of dusky women mingling with the boom of the warm Pacific as it thundered on the reef ; and on the edge of the Arctic had listened with throbbing ears to the keening of an Indian woman mourning her dead mate ; but none of them had shaken him as that sobbing back there in the tent, the weeping of a soul facing the coming darkness.

His utter helplessness in the face of bitter circumstances crushed him, for he did not know what to do, what word to whisper that would bring comfort. There had been small room for priests and the mysteries with which they dealt in his life. In old days he had met them on the northern river travelling hundreds of miles on strenuous trails in pursuit of their vocation, greater travellers than even the Mounted Police ; and again on tropic beaches he had come upon them, worn by dysentery, shaking with malaria, working unafraid among the worst cannibals in the world, but he had never understood them, had indeed

looked with tolerant contempt upon their efforts. Never had he felt the need of their help in his life or understood what they might do for one deeply stricken, but now, standing there in the silence with that sobbing in his ears, he would have given all he possessed to see one of those missionary priests appear suddenly between the lines of the sombre woods, racing with his dog team in his wide cure of souls.

He remained outside the tent quite a long time, pacing to and fro to keep himself warm, his mind busy with thoughts that had never troubled him before, and when at last he re-entered the tent it was to find that the woman had fallen into a fitful sleep. He replenished the fire, and then seated himself to watch by her side. As he sat there his thoughts turned to Nancy Carlowe; and anxiety for her mounted as he remembered what Marie had told him. Gaston Jervaux, as he knew, was capable of despicable and reckless things. If anything went wrong, an accident to her father or some similar thing, Jervaux would force the opportunity it afforded. He was even capable of creating such an opportunity and with the girl at his mercy he would not hesitate to carry out his purpose, no matter by what ruthless means.

The more he considered the situation, the greater became his fears. Without any knowledge of the reasons that had brought the girl from St. Michael to the wilderness, his mind invented reasons for itself. In some way, to serve his own secret purpose, Gaston Jervaux had inspired that journey;

and, perhaps, even whilst he sat there beside the dying woman was engaged in putting his nefarious plan into execution. He ground his teeth at the thought, and looked down at the woman's wasted face.

Was it right that he should linger there, when there was greater need for him elsewhere? Ought one to set the interests of the dying before those of the living? Was he justified in remaining there with one to whom there remained nothing but the release of death, when down the trail Nancy Carlowe might be in gravest peril?

All the law of the Wild said "No" with no uncertain voice. The wolves out there in the darkness fell upon and devoured any injured member of the pack. The Indians in times of famine left the old to die. The law of tooth and fang that everywhere prevailed, the casting away and the desertion of the helpless in time of stress, the invariable rule of the survival of the strong and healthy at the cost of the weak, gave one answer with no uncertain voice. His mind whispered that the woman must die—in a few hours or a few days, that it was useless to remain there when he could be of much greater service elsewhere. But though the temptation was strong, he knew he could not go. The humane instincts, which even in wild years had made him the very good friend of little San Yee entrapped in the dark webs of 'Frisco's Chinatown, asserted themselves now with even greater force. This woman was white; and if he deserted her and left her to face her

last assize of pain alone, he would be no better than the two men down river, whom he had lashed with his contempt.

And yet Marie Jervaux might live for days, perhaps for a week or two, and with every hour that passed Nancy Carlowe's peril would increase! The thought was almost unendurable. He could not sit still under the sting of it; and once more leaving the tent he began to stride to and fro outside.

The ghostly darkness still covered the land; the silence broken only by the faint splutter of the fire, the crunch of his own steps, and the sick woman's laboured breathing held the whole world in thrall. Again there recurred to him the words with which he had tried to comfort the stricken woman. "The good God . . . he made us!" Was that true? Was there indeed any spirit of mercy brooding in the fierceness of the North? Was there a watchful Manitou, as even the Indians believed; or was the thought a myth, a figment of man's brain tortured by the fear of death and of a stillness and darkness even more profound than that of this Arctic night?

Whilst the questions were still racing through his mind, the heavens above him began to lighten, and a moment later a giant bow of milky light was flung into the sky. The ends of the bow began to move and revolve till they became spiral. It seemed to drop down the sky until it was no more than a faint arc of light above the forest; but before he could turn great ribbons of opalescent

light shot into the heavens, giant pennons blown in some mighty wind; which changed their hues as they flickered to and fro from greenish white to mauve and pink, accompanied all the time, as it seemed to him, by a faint rustling and crackling like a banner of silk bellying in the wind. As he watched, it began to revolve, and move up the heavens, until it was like a great spiral, high in the zenith, filling the world with strange unearthly light.

What was that mysterious glow? Who kindled it in the cold and bitter North to——? His thought broke off sharply as he caught a movement in the tent behind him. There was the sound of a cough, not a very loud one, but rather a gulping sound, and then a little, piteous gurgling cry.

“M’sieu’ . . . Clem . . . !”

He hurried into the little tent, to find Marie Jervaux with blood streaming from her mouth. He lifted her, helpless to do anything else; and for one second the dark eyes flashed with gratitude; then again there came a gurgling, choking sound, a little shudder, and he knew that death had come to give the woman in his arms the great release. Very gently he laid her down, wiped the stains from the dead lips, and fell on his knees. No words came from him to break the intense silence, and after a little time he rose, covered the dead woman’s face with the hood of her parka, and went outside.

He had fulfilled his duty to the dying; but before he could hurry to the living woman who all the time had been uppermost in his thoughts,

there remained the performance of the last duty to the dead. The ground under the snow was frozen to rock-like hardness, and to dig a grave was utterly impossible. There remained, however, the method of sepulture practised by the northern tribes, and moving into the wood, he selected a couple of saplings, close to each other. Their tops were elastic as canes almost, and with the aid of a moose-hide rope he easily bent them towards the ground, holding them by the rope in the position he wanted.

That done he returned to the tent. Drawing the sleeping-bag up until it covered the dead face, he fastened down the flap, then taking the rabbit-skin blanket, he tied it round the sleeping-bag until the whole looked like a bundle, that yet by its length suggested the discarded form of humanity. Lifting it in his arms, he carried it to the two bent saplings and carefully and firmly lashed it between them.

The Aurora still glowed, its light making it easy to work without fumbling, and when the last knot was tied, he bowed his head trying to remember something of the burial service. It was little that he could recall; but the first great words were clear in his mind, and he begun to murmur them in the hope that something of the other portions of the service would come to him automatically.

“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in me——”

He got no further. The sudden joyous yelp of

dogs on a homing trail broke on the words, and lifting his head, he turned swiftly to see a sled team and a man racing up the river towards the camp. He stood where he was watching, and within four minutes the dogs swept up the bank, and a minute later the new-comer moved towards him.

“ Bonjour——”

The speaker stopped suddenly as he caught sight of the bundle lashed between the bent pines ; then he made the sign of the cross.

“ My friend,” he said, “ you were about to give sepulchre to some poor mortal.”

As he spoke the light of the Aurora gleamed on a silver cross on the outside of the stranger’s parka ; and he knew that here was one of the priests for whose presence he had wished a little time back.

“ Yes—father ! ” he answered quietly. “ A woman who has just died.”

“ She was of the Church ? ”

“ Yes ! ”

“ Then I can relieve you of one duty, my son.”

Without a word further the priest bent his head and began to recite the office for the dead ; Clem Hardacre also standing with bowed head and closed eyes. When the priest had finished, he released the thongs which bound the saplings, and they swung upright once more, carrying Marie Jervaux’s body with them, then the new-comer put a hand on his arm.

"It is a great trouble that has come to you, my son!"

"No!" answered Hardacre quickly. "A great release!"

"A thing may be both," replied the priest. "The woman—she was your wife?"

"No! She was nothing to me," was the reply. "She was a woman who once helped to do me a great wrong. I heard she was here and I hurried to her——"

"Ah! You sought revenge?"

"Perhaps! But I found her deserted and dying, and . . . and I did what I could."

"It is so that God wrecks the little plans of man," said the priest quietly.

"You think so?" asked Hardacre sharply. "You think that God interferes."

"I am sure."

"You do not know everything, father. Whilst I watched by that woman there, I heard from her that another woman whom I love is in danger from that dead woman's brother, and all the time I waited might be needing my help. Yet I could not go without . . . without——"

"Without losing your manhood. I understand. It is to your honour that you stayed, my son. You have been sorely tried."

"Yes! It was hard to wait."

"The woman's name, my son? You have not told me."

"She was called Marie Jervaux!"

"Jervaux! Marie Jervaux!"

There was a startled note in the priest's voice ; and as he halted by the fire its light showed his face to have a troubled look.

" Yes ! Why do you speak like that ? Did you know her ? "

The priest shook his head. " Not personally," he answered, " though I have heard of her several times in the past few years. But her brother's name ? You did not tell me that ? "

" Gaston Jervaux ! " was the reply given in a hard tone which the priest was quick to note.

" And the name of that other woman whom you love and who was in peril from him ? "

" Nancy Carlowe ! "

" Ah——"

As the exclamation came the priest checked himself suddenly, flashed a swift glance of compassion at the man standing by his side, then turned abruptly and stared into the fire.

A great fear surged in Clem Hardacre. The exclamation, the swift glance, the abrupt silence all seemed charged with weighty significance. He gripped the priest's arm.

" What is it ? " he cried. " There is something ! Tell me. You have met Gaston Jervaux—Nancy ? "

" Yes," said the priest quietly. " And I am afraid that I do not bring you good news."

" What is your news ? " demanded Hardacre, his voice harsh and peremptory.

" You said that you loved the woman, my son ? "

" Yes ! Yes ! Oh, out with it, man ! "

"Then it must be a blow to you! . . . I married her yesterday to Gaston Jervaux."

"Married her! . . . My God!"

The words came in a hoarse whisper. For a moment he stood staring at the priest with wild eyes, and then broke into harsh laughter.

"I waited here," he said, "watching by the side of a dying woman whilst her brother——" He broke off and asked sharply: "It was an ordinary marriage—I mean, that girl was willing? She did not appear to be forced into it?"

"I do not know . . ." said the priest. "There was something I did not understand. Her father was ill and it was no happy woman whom I married. That much I am sure of. There was in her eyes a stony look and her voice——"

Clem Hardacre did not wait for the priest to finish. He moved suddenly and began to pack his sled. The priest watched him with troubled eyes, until the sled being loaded, the young man began to rouse his dogs from their sleeping places in the snow. Then he asked quietly: "Where are you going, my son?"

Hardacre laughed harshly. "I am going down river."

"To the post on Black River?"

"Yes, if they are there."

"But why are you going, my son?"

"I am going to kill Gaston Jervaux," was the reply given in a matter-of-fact tone that made the priest shiver, convincing him as it did that the speaker meant exactly what he said.

"That will be a sin—a crime!"

"Maybe! But I am going to Black River to make Nancy a widow——"

"You go to revenge yourself!"

"Yes, to square accounts! You do not know that swine. I have suffered through him—much, and now this! Do you think anything will stop me? Great heavens, man, I shall die gladly having killed that scoundrel."

He turned to the dogs and began to harness them. The priest watched him. The trouble in his eyes accentuated; and when Hardacre stood upright he announced quietly: "My son, I also am going to Black River."

"If you think you can save Gaston Jervaux——"

"I am not thinking of him," said the priest quietly. "I am thinking of that poor girl, and of you."

And as Clem Hardacre swung his dogs out on the trail, he followed with his own reluctant team.

CHAPTER XV

A VILE PLAN

THREE hours had passed since Pierre Georges had left the post, and Ladronne, who had been busy in the meantime, found himself wondering why his compatriot had not returned.

"Eet ees vaire strange," he muttered to himself as he passed out of the door. "He cannot haf gone, for he haf not take any dogs."

Moving out of the compound, he endeavoured to pick up Black Georges' trail in the confusion of the many tracks that abounded in the neighbourhood of the post. At last he picked out the marks of moccasined feet that as the lack of frost crystals showed were perfectly fresh. They led down river along the trail that was already marked; and he followed a little way wondering where they would lead. Apparently they went straight down river, and after a little time, satisfied upon this point, he halted to consider things. Had Pierre deserted the trading-post, hoping to overtake Gaston Jervaux, whose line of flight led directly to the Alaskan border? It looked very like it; and he was just making up his mind that such was the case when he remembered the Indian

encampment at which the launch had called on its voyage up-stream in the summer.

"By gar!" he cried suddenly. "Pierre haf gone to old Mikaket's camp. For why?"

He had long ago taken the measure of Black Georges, and he was convinced that if the latter had really gone to the encampment it was for no good purpose. It was desirable to find out the truth; but first it behoved him to make things safe at the trading-post, and with that end in view he returned there with all speed. He found the girl still by her father's side but more calm and collected, owing to the fact that the sick man's breathing was less stertorous; though still he remained unconscious. She looked at the voyageur as he stooped over Carlowe and asked anxiously: "What do you think of him, Jean? Don't you think he is a little better?"

"Oui!" answered Jean, speaking his honest conviction. "Ah t'ink de fit ees passing away!"

"Oh, I hope so!" cried the girl.

"But eet will take time, mademoiselle. You mus' not t'ink eet will go all at once. Dat ees not possible."

"If it goes; if he gets well I don't care how long it is," cried Nancy.

"Dat ees de spirit. You must haf patience, mademoiselle. An' now for a leetle time as Ah go out, you must be vaire watchful an' keep de door fast shut."

"Where are you going?" asked the girl quickly.

"Ah am going on de trail of Pierre Georges."

He haf gone down river without dogs; an' Ah t'ink he haf gone to a camp of Indians dere ees down dere, to make trouble for us, you comprehend?"

"But why should he make trouble for us?"

"Because he ees hand an' glove with dat rascal Jervaux, and he mean to get Trevor's leetle book. Dat ees what Ah t'ink. He want to get de Indians to help, so Ah go to make sure. An' while Ah am away you mak' de door fast, an' open to not any one teel Ah come back, mademoiselle."

"Mademoiselle? You forget, Jean, I am madame——"

"Non!" cried Ladronne sharply. "Ah not call you dat—yet! But you do what Ah say?"

"Yes!" answered Nancy simply. "If you think it better that you should go."

"Ah t'ink eet better to know what Black Georges ees t'inking of doing, rather dan to wait till he do eet, mademoiselle, so Ah go down de river for a leetle time, and you must shut de door first of de stockade and den of de cabin and not open till Ah shout, you understand."

"You think there is danger?"

"Ah do not know, but Ah not trust dat Pierre one leetle bit. Dat ees why Ah would haf you be so careful." He put a hand inside his coat, and drew forth the dead trooper's note-book. "And Ah leave dis with you, knowing dat you weel keep eet safe, eef Ah not come back. Oui! you weel do dat for de sake of M'sieu' Carlowe."

"You may be very sure of that, Jean," said

the girl earnestly as she thrust the book into the bosom of her dress.

"An' now Ah go ; an' you, mademoiselle, weel de doors shut behind me."

He turned and took up his rifle, then passed outside, Nancy accompanying him. Outside the gate of the stockade he paused to slip on his snow-shoes, then he turned and waved a mittened hand.

"Au revoir, mademoiselle !" he cried lightly.

"Au revoir, Jean," she answered gravely, and then at his bidding shut the door of the stockade.

Jean slid down the bank and took the down river trail, following in his steps on the track of Pierre Georges. The short day was drawing to a close. Under the trees it was already dark ; and an eerie gloom was deepening between the high banks of the river along which the trail ran. But Jean Ladronne scarcely noticed the fact. The trail was before him, and even in the gloom he could scarcely miss it ; and the urgent need of discovering Black Georges' intentions steeled him against those terrors which sometimes overtake men who journey alone amid the solitudes of the North. Steadily, keeping a swinging pace that devoured the miles in a fashion that many would have deemed incredible, he moved on for perhaps two hours, then he stopped quite suddenly, as a clamour of distant yells broke the heavy silence.

"What dat mean ?" he asked himself. "Eet come from Mikaket's camp sure."

Whilst he stood there the yelling broke out afresh, and in the midst of it he caught the sharp

unmistakable crang of a rifle. A look of wonder came on his face.

"By gar!" he whispered. "Some one shoot."

The clamour continued, twice the rifle sounded, and still he stood there uncertain what to do.

"Dat mean trouble for some one at Mikaket's camp, maybe for dat Pierre."

He cared not a rap what happened to Black Georges, but trouble for the latter almost inevitably meant trouble for every one at the post if, as he suspected, the man had come into conflict with the Indians. It was imperative, therefore, that he should find out what was occurring; and with that end in view he moved forward once more.

He had advanced less than half-a-mile, when the yelling broke out afresh; and quite suddenly the gloom ahead was broken by a red flash, and immediately on the heels of it came the crack of the rifle-shot.

"Mon Dieu!" he muttered. "Dey are vaire near." Halting, and staring ahead he presently caught sight of a shadowy form moving against the farther bank, clearly endeavouring to find shelter in its shadow. He waited, watching intently, and farther behind was able to make out several other dark figures, in pursuit as he guessed, for the man in the shadow of the bank turned once and fired his rifle towards them.

He waited until the fugitive drew nearer, and then he shouted:

" Pierre ! "

" Who dat ? " cried Black Georges' voice, hoarse and strained :

" Jean Ladronne ! "

" Den shoot, eef you haf gun, to keep *les diables* back."

He himself fired at the advancing shadows, and realizing that the case was desperate, Jean fired twice, sending his bullets singing over the heads of the pursuers, and as the shadowy figures left the white trail and melted into the deep shadows of the bank, Pierre Georges reached him.

The big Canadian was panting and gasping, and his face was horribly cut, as Jean could see even in that ghostly light.

" Forward ! " grunted Georges hoarsely, " eef you not want to die."

" What ees eet ? What haf happened ? " asked Jean, running by the other's side.

" Dose bucks of Mikaket's are after me, you, all of us. Dey are mad with whiskee. Jervaux haf showed dem de secret cache."

" Jervaux ! De secret cache ! What you mean——"

" Ah tell you presently ; when we get to de cabin. We must make hurree. Dat Jervaux he ees de devil."

Ladronne asked no more questions for the moment. He knew from Black Georges' manner and from his brief words that the position was a serious one ; something much more than a mere personal

disagreement between Pierre and old Mikaket. There was devilry of some kind afoot; some scheme that possibly involved the destruction of all at the trading-post, and though he was intensely curious, he asked no further questions, but helped the fugitive to keep the pursuers at a respectable distance by occasionally stopping to fire a shot in their direction. Exhausted but safe, they reached the stockade, only to find the gates closed according to Jean's instructions; and as they halted in front of it, a yell broke from the woods on the farther bank, and a rifle cracked. Jean heard the bullet go singing over the post, and caught the "phat" of it as it plugged a tree, then as Georges returned the shot, he shouted hoarsely: "Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle Nanceey!"

He heard the door of the cabin open, and the sound was followed by the crunch of light steps on the frozen snow inside the stockade.

"Is that you, Jean?" came Nancy Carlowe's voice.

"Oui! Mademoiselle and Pierre. Open queeck. Dere ees need for haste, but stand behind de gate as you open."

Black Georges' rifle cracked again as he finished speaking; and looking round he saw half a score of dark figures crossing the frozen river.

"Queeck, madam——"

The bar dropped and the gate swung open as he was speaking, and Pierre Georges leaped inside, with Jean at his heels. The latter flung the gate to and seized the bar as a yell from the pursuing

Indians filled the silence with blood-curdling sound.

"Run, mademoiselle. To de cabin, queeck!"

The girl did not stop to ask questions, but ran back to the cabin as instructed, and obeyed a further instruction to latch the door; then he looked at Black Georges, who stood there panting with his exertions. But, clearly, he was no coward; for even whilst he panted, he laughed hoarsely.

"Now we giv' dose canaille hell! You dat side, me on dis. Ah show you de loophole."

He took Jean to a place half-way down the wall of the stockade, and with a knife dug out the frozen snow, then peered through the loophole thus revealed.

"Dey not come yet," he said. "Dey go back to de wood to make plan. Ah look de other side an' make certain."

He cut the snow from a hidden loophole on the second side, and took a careful survey of the woods, then he came back.

"Dey gone. But presently, dey will come back."

Jean with a wave of his hand indicated the third side of the triangular stockade, and Black Georges laughed.

"Dat ees safe, mon ami. Dey will not come dat way because of de rock dey haf to climb. Dey know we shoot dem like moose stalled in de deep snow eef dey come dat way. Come to de cabin an' Ah tell you what haf happen."

Reassured by the thought that no immediate

attack was to be expected, Jean followed the other into the cabin, and with the door shut turned and looked at Black Georges. The latter's face was covered with frozen blood that had flowed from a deep cut below the cheek-bone, and that he had fought for his life was evident from the state of his dress which was cut and slashed in half a dozen places. The wound, however, did not seem to trouble the big Canadian, and Ladrone was worried by other things at the moment.

"Now," he said abruptly, "you tell what haf happened."

Black Georges' eyes glowed with sudden anger. "Eet ees dat Jervaux," he said hoarsely; "when he go away from here he call at Mikaket's camp; and he show dose Indians where we cache de whiskey——"

"There was whisky here, then?" asked Nancy sharply.

"Oui! Eet ees sent up in a leetle steamer which follow us when we come up here to build de post."

"Tiens!" cried Jean. "Den M'sieu' Clem was right. He did hear a launch down de river!"

"Eet follow us all de way," said Pierre with a chuckle, "and Jervaux ees in charge of it; and he make a cache near every post; not at the post itself, you understand; for dere de police might find eet; and besides we not want Hardacre to know."

A stern look hardened the lines of the girl's face.

"But my father knew?" she asked.

"Oui! He an' Jervaux make de plan together."

"And what has happened now, I understand, is that Mr. Jervaux showed Mikaket's Indians the secret cache, and that having raided it they are now mad with drink?"

"Dat ees eet, mademoiselle."

"But why should he do that?" asked the girl sharply.

"To save himself an' to get de spoils," answered Pierre promptly. "He ees a deep one—dat Jervaux! He know dat dis time he haf sure keeled de mounted policeman; an' dat Jean an' you haf seen him do eet. And he know dat de oder mounters weel surely try to get him eef dey learn de truth, so he take steps to covaire his trail, you comprehend, so dat dey shall not know what he haf done."

"But I don't understand," said Nancy, her face betraying her perplexity. "How would giving Mikaket's Indians drink cover his trail from the mounted police."

"Eet make dem mad enough for anyt'ing," replied Georges with a knowing leer. "And he haf arranged with Mikaket to loot and burn de post, telling heem dat he can take everyt'ing here and be a rich man; and also dat dere is much more whiskee here, which ees not true; but Mikaket not know dat, of course."

"And what is to happen to us?" asked the girl in amazement.

"To you, mademoiselle, not'ings! You are to be taken to Mikaket's camp till Jervaux fetch you——"

"Ah! And my father?"

"He ees to go the way dat Jean an' Ah go; which ees de way of dat dead mounter; an' when de Indians have fired de post an' we are burned up with eet, none weel ever know de truth, and Jervaux he escape, scot-free, as you say; and he haf you an' M'sieu' Carlowe's money all to himself."

For a moment there was silence and Jean opening the door went outside to reconnoitre, then Nancy asked abruptly:

"But how did you learn all this, Pierre Georges?"

A knowing look came in the man's dark eyes. "Some of eet Ah hear from a leetle *klootch* down at Mikaket's camp; an' de rest Ah guess, knowing dat Gaston Jervaux haf put de cross on us."

"You are sure of that?"

"Certain! He ees a deep one, dat Jervaux, and all along since he meet your father he mean to feather his nest, an' to marree you; an' he not care a goose-feather what happen to de rest of us."

"And he arranged for the post to be attacked and burned?"

"Dat also ees sure. De leetle *klootch* ees my friend, an' she not lie; she tell me all to save me."

"But why did you go to the camp at all?" questioned the girl distrustfully. "You did not know all this when you went."

"Non!" replied Georges, a hang-dog look in his eyes. "But Ah weel de truth tell. When

Ah start for de camp of Mikaket, Ah want dat leetle book of de dead mounter vaire bad, dat Ah may put eet in de stove an' so destroy what the mounter haf written about Jervaux, who haf promised me much money, when Ah haf helped him to marree you; an' dat promise would be of not any use, eef de mounters should come an' take him. But Jean Ladronne he weel not give up dat leetle book, an' he weel be on de watch so dat Ah shall not be able to take eet from him; and Ah t'ink Ah weel get some of Mikaket's Indians to do eet for me, to-morrow; for Jean weel not be on the look-out for dem, an' dey weel easily knock him on de head an' steal de leetle book for me."

The girl considered this callous confession thoughtfully. It bore, as she recognized, every sign of truth; and the fact that he had clearly been roughly handled, and that the natives had pursued him almost to the gate of the stockade, was further evidence that he was not lying.

"What happened at——" she broke off; and looked sharply towards the door as the latch was lifted. A second later Ladronne entered; and her eyes shot a wordless question.

Jean shook his head. "Not'ing ees happening, mademoiselle, and dere ees not any one in sight. Dose drunken Indians dey wait for others to come, Ah guess."

The girl turned again to Pierre Georges, and continued her questioning: "What happened at Mikaket's camp when you got there?"

"Dere ees great noise which Ah hear before Ah reach de camp, and as Ah not understand why dat should be Ah go vaire cautiously, till Ah see what ees happening. Den Ah see de girl dat ees my friend ; and whilst de bucks are singing an' dancing like madmen, Ah call to her and haf a long talk with her, till Ah know what ees happening. Den because Ah know Mikaket much better dan Jervaux do, Ah t'ink Ah weel haf a good talk with him, an' persuade him from de plan ; for de chief know dat eef things happen dat are vaire bad de mounted police weel come. But Mikaket ees watchin' the dance, and he haf drunk much whiskee, and when Ah begin to talk to him, he laugh at me, and say something to a young buck who does not lofe me, because of de leetle *klootch*, you comprehend. De buck ees mad with hate of me an' with de drink, and he come for me with a leetle axe, but Ah shoot him dead ; an' den dere ees de devil to pay. Ah hit old Mikaket on de head with de butt of my rifle ; an' den Ah fight my way out of de camp, an' keep dose who come after me back, until Ah meet Jean here who help. Dat ees all de story, made-moiselle, an' Jervaux he ees at de bottom of eet all."

Nancy Carlowe had no doubt of the last statement ; and she was appalled at the callous iniquity of the thing which Gaston Jervaux had planned. He had tricked her into marriage, and in the eyes of the law he was now her husband, but she was determined that she would never fall into his

hands. The fact that after slaying Trevor he had coolly planned to wipe out every one in the cabin except herself, assured her that Black Georges had fathomed Jervaux's purpose aright, and that he was cold-bloodedly scheming to obtain possession of her father's wealth. But the knowledge, instead of filling her with fear, braced her nerves. At all costs that nefarious scheme must be defeated, and she looked straight at the narrator as he finished his story.

"And you think that those Indians outside will sooner or later attack?"

"Dat ees certain!"

"Can we keep them out?"

"Oui! Ah t'ink so! We build dis post to fight eef necessary."

"Then it must be done, at all costs, you understand. You were Gaston Jervaux's accomplice——"

"Sacrebleu! Oui! But you not understand. He haf put de cross on me. Eef he show up, Ah shoot him on sight. Ah not friends with him any more. An' for dose canaille outside, Ah haf not any tenderness, and Ah not want to die yet. Ah help Jean to save us all, and when dat Jervaux——"

The report of a rifle broke the stillness outside the post and cut short the man's protestations. He turned towards the door.

"Come, Jean, de fun begin." Then he looked over his shoulder. "Trust me, mademoiselle. Ah haf been crossed an' now Ah get even."

Jean picked up his rifle, nodded reassuringly to Nancy, and as the door closed behind them, a second rifle cracked, and in the roof over her head the girl heard the bullet strike.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERVENTION

IN the darkness of a bitter night, Father Grouard—the lightest of sleepers—was awakened by a sound of movement, and sitting up, looked round. The fire was burning low, but the stars were bright, and by their light he could see Clem Hardacre staring along the trail.

“What is it, my son?”

“I do not know! I cannot sleep. I have a premonition that something is happening down there, that I must be moving on.”

The priest did not smile or treat the matter lightly. He had experienced premonitions in his time which he had found to be genuine and justified by the events, and he also stared down the trail with a very thoughtful look upon his face.

“What is it that you are afraid of, my son?”

“I do not know. But I feel that I must go—and go I will. I cannot wait for morning. I shall start at once. You do not know that man——”

“Whom you are hurrying to kill.”

“Yes! It is no use arguing, Father Grouard. I do not understand what induced her to do it, but I am sure that Nancy Carlowe did not marry

that scoundrel willingly, and I will free her from him though it costs me my life."

The priest stooped and threw a couple of logs on the fire. He waited a moment before he spoke, then he said quietly: "Hardacre, that will be murder."

"No, justice! You do not know the man as I do!"

"Perhaps not; but I am beginning to know something about a man who stayed to nurse a dying woman, when all his inclination would have hurried him to Black River Post. My son, you can't do this thing!"

"I can, and I will!" replied the young man stormily. "The man is black all through. And this thing that he has done to Nancy Carlowe is unforgivable. I shall never rest till he is dead—till she is free."

"You think that she will marry you, after you have slain the man who is now her husband?"

"I do not know! I have not got so far. I——"

"Hardacre, no nice woman could do that. If you kill Jervaux you will put a barrier between yourself and the fulfilment of your desire that can never be broken down."

"I don't care! At any rate I shall deliver Nancy from that bondage."

"And I shall pray God to save you from the crime."

Without making any reply Clem Hardacre turned, and began to make preparations for a meal and for his departure. The priest watched him

thoughtfully. There was a haggard look on the strong face, and a glitter in the steel-blue eyes that might have been mistaken for the light of fever. The man's passion, as the priest recognized, was consuming him, his vengeful ardour burning his vital forces like flame. All the time his thoughts were with that girl to deliver whom he would go to such extreme lengths; or they were turned to the evil man whom he was hurrying to destroy. Would anyone be able to prevent him ruining his life utterly—to save this man who having endured great wrong had forgiven, only to be called to this greater pain? Father Grouard did not know; he hoped that possibly Nancy herself might have some influence; but in any case he must be with Clem Hardacre when he made the trading-post on Black River.

Bone-tired though he was, for on the previous day they had travelled fast and late, he also began to prepare for departure; and three-quarters of an hour later when Clem Hardacre pulled out of the camp, it was with the priest's team close behind. But it was not close for very long, for Hardacre set a tremendous pace with which Father Grouard's dogs could not keep up, and soon he found himself dropping behind.

He accepted the fact philosophically enough. For twenty years he had followed the trails of the North, and he knew what dogs could do; and that soon the team in front must begin to flag if the pace was kept up. Presently in the gloom he lost sight of Hardacre altogether; but occasionally

the crack of a whip or the yelp of a dog cut by the lash sounded through the night.

"Poor soul!" murmured the priest. "But what will not a man do driven by love and hate together?"

Steadily he pursued his way, and after a little time the sounds ceased to reach him, though once as he stopped to listen, the faint hum of sled runners on clear ice was drifted to him, and a full hour afterwards the sharp crack of a pistol.

"Ah!" whispered Grouard. "Something has happened. He has cut one of the dogs loose."

Two miles farther on the truth of this anticipation was proved, for lying by the side of the trail he passed a dog stark in death.

"Poor brute!" said the priest, and still continued steadily upon his way, knowing that now it would require but little effort to overtake the man in front, or even to pass him when he should choose to do so.

To pass him! Yes, that was the way. The thought came suddenly to Father Grouard. He could yet save this man so bitterly tried from the crime to which he was speeding, for Hardacre by the very ardour of his hate had now put himself at a disadvantage. It would be possible to forge ahead of him, and warn the man who was to be his victim. But if Jervaux waited? The priest had scarcely asked himself the question before he dismissed it. Gaston Jervaux would not wait. He had done wrong, and he would run, and though Clem Hardacre would be mortally angry at first, when his murderous passion had cooled, he would

understand and might even find it in his heart to be grateful.

So reflecting and planning he swung forward, maintaining an even pace that suited both the dogs and himself. An hour passed without his overtaking the leading team, though the sounds that now and again reached him through the gloom told him that he was gaining. He was planning the point at which he would pass Hardacre when the gloom began to lighten. The trail became clearly visible ; and it was possible to pick out the trees from the shadows ; and quite suddenly he came in sight of the leading team. The dogs were lying in the snow ; and Clem Hardacre himself was standing in a tense attitude. Suddenly the young man looked back and beckoned to him excitedly.

Divining that something unusual had occurred or was occurring, Father Grouard cried urgently to his team, and as they quickened the pace, hurried forward. In a little time he halted his dogs a little behind the other team ; and as he caught the look on Hardacre's worn face he cried : " What is it ? "

" Listen ! " was the reply, accompanied by a lift of the hand in warning.

The priest threw back his ear-flaps for a moment and stood listening.

" There ! And there again ! You heard ? "

" Yes ! " answered the priest. " I heard two rifle shots ! "

" And I have heard—— There ! And again !

I heard it ten minutes ago first, but could not believe my ears. Something is happening down there ! ”

“ But the post is at least six miles away——” began the priest thoughtfully.

“ By the river, yes ! But across country it is much nearer. What—— Ah ! You heard that ? ”

“ Yes ! I am afraid there is something seriously wrong at the trading-post,” answered Father Grouard, a troubled note in his voice.

“ But what—— Great Scot ! Those Indians down the river, old Mikaket’s lot ! They must have broken out. . . . I remember that Pierre Georges who knew them seemed to entertain the thought that they might cause trouble and was glad we built the post with a stockade.”

“ Pierre Georges is a man to cause trouble,” replied the priest grimly. “ I remember him of old. We must push on—and together.”

“ Yes ! ” answered Hardacre, and shouted to his dogs.

“ Spare the whip ! ” counselled the priest. “ It will pay nothing to overdrive your team—as you have done ! ”

“ I was a brute ! ” said the young man, flushing. “ But when a man is in a rage——”

“ I understand, my son, as maybe the good God does. But now we keep an even pace—together.”

The plan of passing his companion was dismissed from the priest’s mind. He had no doubt whatever that Hardacre’s surmise was the right one ; and he knew that it was desirable that now neither of them should appear on the scene alone. With

the sounds of strife increasing in their ears they sped on ; each of them the prey to bitter anxiety ; the one thinking of the girl whose safety he counted dearer than his own life ; the other troubled by the thought of the Indians with whom he had small influence, and who were the wild children of his wide parish.

The greyiness of dawn gave place to full daylight and the ghostly world through which they had moved in the dark hours became a world of brilliant white. The ice-drops on the trees and bushes flashed in the sun, and the frost crystals everywhere sparkled with prismatic fire. But of this evanescent beauty neither of the hasting men took any note. The priest, whose eyes were weak and easily affected by the glare, took out a pair of wooden spectacles with traverse slits and put them on, but Clem Hardacre, with his eyes brighter than the myriad jewels of frost and snow, stared straight ahead, a tense, strained expression upon his worn face. A slight bend of the river brought a sudden increase in the sound of strife ; and with the shots there mingled the yells of excited men. The next turn would bring them in sight of the trading-post, and Clem Hardacre was wondering what manner of reception awaited them, and how they could best intervene, when Father Grouard spoke :

“ I go first, my son. It is my right. I am known to Mikaket’s people, and maybe they will listen to me.”

“ And if they do not ? ”

"Then it is for you to do what you can! For my part—I am a priest and I cannot fight them."

"Then take your turn, father; and I will follow with mine."

He laughed harshly as he spoke; and taking his rifle from the sled, began to slip off its protecting covering. The priest noted his action; and shook his head.

"Only if I fail!" he said warningly, and urged his dogs ahead of the younger man's team.

The firing was still proceeding as they swung round the bend of the river and came in sight of the block-house post. Hardacre, in the first hasty glance, counted three Indians lying in the snow at the foot of the river bank opposite the post; and four more almost against the stockade walls. That they were dead he had no question, their prone and grotesque attitudes left him in no doubt of that; whilst the firing from the stockade proved that at least some of the defending party were all right. A shout from the post and a yell from the woods along both banks greeted their advent, whilst Hardacre heard a bullet whiz past his head. Yet still the intrepid priest pushed on straight into the line of fire, and then quite suddenly halted, and stood with lifted hand.

The yelling from the banks died away suddenly, and the firing ceased, no doubt because the attackers recognized the heroic father. A voice shouted something, and without so much as a glance over his shoulder at Clem Hardacre, who stood with his rifle ready for action, the priest moved towards

the bank opposite the fort, and disappeared in the trees.

Hardacre remained where he was, stamping his feet in the snow and keeping a watchful eye on the now silent woods. Once or twice he glanced at the trading-post, which he had been so impatient to reach, and outside which he must perforce wait until Father Grouard returned. The minutes passed slowly; and his impatience grew apace. He burned to know the truth of Nancy Carlowe's marriage to Jervaux, and as he thought of the latter he gripped his rifle with firmer hands and a harsh look came on his face.

"Nothing shall save him!" he whispered. "Nothing!" Scarcely had the words been uttered, when quite distinctly through the silence he caught the click of a breech-bolt. It came from the trading-post and the thought crossed his mind that standing there in the open he made an excellent mark; and that if Gaston Jervaux recognized him and desired to pick him off, it would be the easiest thing in the world for him to do so. But he did not move. The priest had momentarily stayed the attack on the post; and even Gaston Jervaux would not desire to precipitate it afresh by firing a shot at such a moment.

As he waited, his impatience mounted to a feverish pitch. Would Father Grouard never come? Had something happened back there in the silent woods, and would he himself be the next victim? There was a sudden bustle in the silent woods, a sound of movement, of voices, and it was followed

by a responsive movement in the post, where the light glinted upon a rifle barrel as it was thrust through a loophole in the stockade. He slipped his right hand half-way out of the cumbersome mitten, ready for action, and waited with every sense alert, for what was to follow.

Then quite suddenly his attitude relaxed, and he drew a breath of relief. Father Grouard, accompanied by an old Indian whom he recognized as Chief Mikaket, appeared at the edge of the wood, and stood for a moment in conversation. Then the priest descended to the river and began to walk towards Hardacre, who awaited his coming with lively curiosity.

"Come," said the priest, "we will go to the post. I have talked with the chief, who will try to draw off his tribesmen; but it will be difficult, for they are half mad with drink, and very angry because of those dead men." He waved his hand towards the figures lying in the snow, and a frown came on his face. "It is a strange story that Mikaket tells, almost an unbelievable one, and if it is true he is not entirely to blame." He turned towards the trading-post, and making a trumpet of his hands, shouted: "No firing, please, I have arranged a truce!"

Then he led the way to the post, Clem Hardacre following, his hot heart beating wildly, his eyes a-glitter with anticipation. The priest turned once and looked at him, and as he faced the post anew, an enigmatic smile came on his face. As they reached the stockade the gate swung open,

and as they swept through a voice shouted in gladness :

“ M’sieu’ Clem ! ”

It was Jean Ladronne who hailed him, but Hardacre took absolutely no notice. His eyes swept round the compound and saw only one other man, Pierre Georges, standing, rifle in hand. He looked towards the cabin. The man whom he sought must be inside. With quick resolute steps he walked to the door, tugged the latch-string, flung the door open, and crossing the threshold, looked round with blazing eyes. The room was empty except for Nancy, and for some one in the bunk in the corner over whom at the moment she was bending. For a second it crossed his mind that the man whom he sought had been hurt, then he remembered that it might be her father, and at the same instant the girl turned round.

A startled cry came from her as she saw him standing there, and a white stricken look came on the delicate face, whilst the beautiful eyes stared at him wildly.

“ Where is Gaston Jervaux ? ” he asked in a voice that rang with menace.

Nancy shivered at his tone. “ I . . . I do not know ! ”

“ He is not here ? ”

“ No ! He left the day before yesterday, after . . after—— ”

“ After your marriage ? ”

“ Yes ! Within an hour ! Thank God ! ”

"Why did he go?"

"It was part of the bargain, that he should go immediately afterwards."

"It was a bargain then? Father Grouard was right. You did not marry Jervaux willingly?"

"Oh! no! no! I hate the man!" cried Nancy in a quivering voice.

That cry shook him with its anguish, and he took a step forward. "My dear," he cried back in an agony of appeal, "why did you do it? Oh, why did you?"

"It was for my father's sake," she whispered, breaking into tearless sobs. "That vile man tricked us; made it seem that my father was in grave danger from the Mounted Police, and my father, being wounded and unable to help himself, appealed to me, and . . . and so——"

"Your father was wounded?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes! He was shot by a mounted policeman who came to our camp, and who was shot in turn and left for dead in the snow. Jervaux made us believe my father was guilty of the trooper's death, and agreed to take the blame on condition that I married him. I loathed the thought, but there seemed nothing else for it; and at last I agreed——" She broke down and covered her face with her hands. When she looked up, her face was wet with tears, her eyes full of terrible anguish. "Scarcely . . . scarcely had the priest gone . . . when . . . we learned the truth. The trooper was not dead. He . . . he came here——"

" Came here ? " cried Hardacre.

" Yes, with Jean Ladronne ! He came to arrest Jervaux . . . and Jervaux shot him dead . . . there ! close by the wall ! Oh—h ! It was horrible."

Again she buried her face in her hands, and stood there, her whole figure shaken by great sobs. Clem Hardacre watched her with burning eyes, his mind busy with the things that she had told him, the hatred of Jervaux within his heart glowing to whiter heat. Then he took a step forward, and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

" My dear," he said in a hoarse, shaking voice, " look at me."

Slowly she lifted her face and her brimming eyes met his.

" Where is Jervaux now ? "

" I do not know," she stammered shakily. " He went away immediately after . . . after—— He was to go to St. Michael, but Jean has a strange story about his intending to come back here for me——"

" He shall never have you ! " he cried fiercely.

" I will die first."

" No ! It is Gaston Jervaux who will die ! I will see to that, though I trail him across the world."

" Oh," she whispered, " you must not——"

" Nothing shall save him. He shall not shadow your life."

" But . . . but——"

" I will not listen ! You were for me. You know it, we both knew it ; and now this scoundrel has

come between us! But he shall be removed. Before God, I swear it. . . . That story you mentioned? What is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't the particulars. Jean knows. Pierre told him."

"I must talk to Jean," he said, and, turning on his heel, abruptly left her.

Outside he found Father Grouard with Black Georges and Jean Ladronne standing in the gateway watching the Indians assembled on the farther bank conferring together. As he appeared the priest turned and looked at him with eyes that, whilst grave, were sympathetic.

"So God has intervened, my son."

"No," he replied harshly. "The devil—who watches over his own. Jean, I want a word with you."

Jean Ladronne stepped back into the compound, and as he did so Hardacre spoke: "Tell me all you know about this business."

And Jean told, whilst the other listened, his face set, his eyes stern, until the story was ended; then he asked sharply:

"You mean he is behind this attack upon the post?"

"So Pierre Georges say; and he know. Dat Jervaux covaire up hees tracks dis way. He meant dat de Indians, mad with whiskee, should burn de post an' keel us all except mademoiselle, den he come an' fetch her away. Eet was a vaire clevaire scheme."

"Too clever by half! And he is coming back to Mikaket's camp, you say?"

"To get Mademoiselle Nancy, whom he haf marry, you comprehend."

Hardacre stepped forward to the priest. "That unbelievable story which old Mikaket told you—was it that Gaston Jervaux was returning in his tracks to fetch the girl?"

"Yes! But you put it mildly," answered Father Grouard with a wry smile. "Jervaux is romantic. According to the chief, he was to rescue his wife from the Indians' clutches in some quite dramatic way."

Hardacre turned to Jean Ladronne. "Jean," he said, "I want fresh dogs; you have them?"

"Oui, m'sieu'."

"Harness them at once!"

"Where are you going, my son?" asked the priest sharply.

"I am going down river to meet Jervaux."

"Hardacre, you must not go. Those Indians are in a dangerous temper yet. They may kill you."

"What matter if I kill Gaston Jervaux first?"

"You will wait for him at Mikaket's camp?"

"No! Below it. He may get the news of the failure of his plans, and I want to be between him and the border, so that I can drive him this way into the wilderness."

The priest looked at him with troubled eyes. "My son, the man deserves to die; but your hand must not do the deed. Leave him to the law. I know your hopes——"

"I have but one hope—to meet that man."

"You have another hope behind it, I know. Think—if you should destroy it utterly by this deed, it is not you alone who will suffer."

Hardacre's only reply was an impatient gesture ; then he turned to Jean Ladronne, who was already harnessing the dogs.

"Jean," he said, "you will guard Miss Carlowe till I return."

"Oui, M'sieu' Clem."

"And if Jervaux eludes me and shows up here, you will shoot him on sight."

"Oui, m'sieu'. He keel Trevor and Ah am of de police what you call temporarily. Ah haf de right to shoot."

"Then shoot and spare not. Gaston Jervaux can't afford to surrender, and he will take no risks."

"Ah understand dat, m'sieu'. Ah shall not play with heem—if he comes."

"That's right ! Now I'll start. I ought to be in plenty of time." He broke off, looked back at the cabin as if he would like to see Nancy Carlowe again, then turned abruptly away.

"Au revoir," he said to the three men, who watched him thoughtfully as he pulled out of the stockade. Outside he stopped and slipped into his snow-shoes, but did not look back ; then he clung to the sled as it took the bank, dragging all his weight upon it to keep it from overrunning the dogs, and a moment later was moving down the river, watched alike by the sullen Indians and the three white men who stood at the gate of the stockade.

“God help the man!” whispered the priest.

“Amen!” said Jean fervently, and then as the cabin door opened, turned swiftly to find Nancy staring forth with troubled eyes.

He saw her look round the compound, and then her gaze crossed his.

“Jean,” she said in a half-whisper. “Where is Mr. Hardacre?”

“Gone, mademoiselle!”

“Gone!” There was a note of despair in her voice, a look of anguish on her face, as she tottered against the door-post, and Father Grouard, leaping forward, was just in time to catch her in his arms as she slid into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OATH OF SERVICE

AS he marched down river, Clem Hardacre followed a well-marked trail, and for a time, engrossed in his black thoughts, he took little notice of it. It would have been possible for him to make a great pace on such a trail, but he contented himself with a moderate one, sparing both himself and his team. When he reached the Indian encampment, he halted his dogs, turned the sled to the side to prevent them running away with it, then ascended the bank to investigate. He carried his rifle, but had no anticipation of using it, because, as he guessed, all the able-bodied men would be up-river still. As he stepped on the hard-packed snow of the encampment his eyes rapidly surveyed things; and his mind was alert for any sign of the man he sought. He found none. Only the squaws, two aged men and the children were in the encampment, and inquiry revealed that Gaston Jervaux had not yet returned. But he did not take the natives' word for that. Tepee by tepee he examined the whole encampment, as in old days he had examined many such encampments when seeking for some criminal hiding from justice.

His manner was the curt, official manner of those former days, and it so impressed the Indians, that none of them denied him admittance, and at length he stood by the last of the moose-hide tents, assured that Jervaux was not in the camp.

He called a young Indian woman and asked her which way Jervaux had gone when he left the encampment. The woman immediately pointed down river, and going to the bank he saw that the well-marked trail that he had followed down river ended in the immediate neighbourhood of the camp, and that beyond the surface of the snow was broken only by the passage of a single team. He examined the tracks carefully. Only one man had accompanied the team, and he had no doubt at all that the man who had gone down river was Jervaux.

"Running towards the border, till the natives have done what he arranged," he thought. "Means to keep clear of the thing till it is done and then come back and make a dramatic rescue of Nancy. Well——" He laughed harshly, and righting the sled, began to follow the trail of the fleeing Jervaux. Five miles lower down he experienced a slight shock of surprise as the trail left the main river and swung up a small creek which led towards the back of the woods.

He stood to consider this change of direction. Was it possible that, after all, Jervaux, instead of seeking the border and the opportunity of escape that it offered in case of need arising, had turned up here, to make a solitary camp, there to await the issue? He rejoiced at the possibility, and

turned his team up the creek. Now he made a cautious progress, watching every yard of the way, constantly checking the too eager pace of his dogs, stopping now and again to sniff the air for any odour of burning wood. The creek was a winding one, and every turn in it he took with caution, reconnoitring carefully, lest swinging round one of the bends he should run unexpectedly upon his enemy's camp.

He was under no illusion as to what would happen if for lack of caution he thus stumbled on the man he sought. Gaston Jervaux would shoot at sight, and beyond question he would shoot to kill. The conviction of this kept him on the *qui vive*, watchful every moment ; alert at every turn or likely-looking bluff behind which a man might make a camp. This caution made for slow progress, but though noon passed, and the short day began to fail without any sign of the man he sought except the endless sled-trail, he did not allow impatience to lead him to an indiscretion. He was the hunter now, keen, alert, making his stalk with infinite patience, sure that at the end he would find his quarry.

In a little hollow hidden on all sides from view he made a very small fire, boiled coffee and cooked a hasty meal, then once more resumed his stalk. The sun had now fallen out of sight again, but the light of it still flamed, turning the sky to pink and amethyst, which as he marched faded and yielded place to a delicate primrose glow on the southern horizon, contrasting with the purple sky frostily bright with stars.

The temperature was falling and the cold was intense, fifty degrees below zero as he judged, and no sound save that of his own travel broke the great silence, for intense cold invariably drives all animal life to shelter. Not a fox barked, not a rabbit hopped across the trail; not even a wolf gave his hunting howl. Yet whilst the creatures of the Wild sought shelter he kept on, moving from the silence behind to the infinite silence ahead, implacable, driven by the great hate in his heart to face the risks such travel involved.

The primrose glow had faded altogether from the sky; and the purple with its spangles of silver points made a great arch overhead, when he realized that the woods were beginning to thin out. Soon they became a mere scattering, and as he moved on they opened out on a small barren, where the trail he followed left the river, and swung straight across the open place on which nothing appeared except the everlasting blanket of snow, broken only by the tops of some dwarf spruce close at hand.

He stared at this change of direction in much perplexity. Then he considered the points of the compass carefully, and still he could not understand. As well as he could in the ghostly gloom he examined the tracks in the snow, and reached the conclusion that the change in direction had been abruptly made. Why? As he asked himself the question he looked round the dim waste. Everywhere except overhead was in frosty gloom. The trees behind him were mere shadows, before him

was nothing but the empty barren but half visible in the eerie greyness. He could see nothing to account for the abrupt change of direction, could think of nothing unless it was that Jervaux had reached the limit of the distance he proposed to go and had decided to pitch camp.

But why in that case had he swung across the barren? That was no place for a camp: and he was mystified by the other's action. Was it a mere blind? Had Jervaux anticipated that he might be pursued and was he deliberately taking this course in order to lure any possible pursuer into the open? That was at any rate feasible, and as Hardacre considered it, it was borne upon him that presently the man ahead would double back, possibly work round to the river and so force anybody who was following him to approach across the open. As he thought over the matter it seemed worth while putting the possibility to the test; and for a little while to follow the course of the river instead of that puzzling trail across the barren. It would be easy enough to return if he were wrong in his conjectures; and in any case he had the comforting assurance that unless Jervaux doubled back he was between him and Mikaket's camp.

He began to break trail across the river course; and had gone less than a mile before he found himself moving towards timber again. Yet another mile, and he struck another trail which careful observation told him came over the high bank from the direction of the barren across which

Jervaux's trail had gone when he left the river. So he was right after all! As the thought came to him his heart leaped with fierce exultation and, weary as he now was, he continued the chase. He did not go very far. The river meandered a great deal; and the trail followed a wide bend where it would have been natural to make a cut-off, but which had not been made. Wondering why, Clem Hardacre followed it cautiously, and as the turn opened the trail to view, came suddenly upon a camp-fire set in the shadow of some trees.

His dogs yelped joyously, and before he could stop them raced forward. To surprise the man he sought was now entirely out of the question, and the sole hope was to take him on the rush. He clung to the bar of the sled with one hand, and slipping off his mitten, drew his revolver. It was too cold to keep his hand uncovered without serious risk of freezing it; so letting the pistol swing by its lanyard, he returned his hand to the mitten, until the dogs were actually making the camp, when again he slipped his hand bare and grasped the pistol ready for instant action.

As he swept up the bank, a man appeared out of a little tent and cried sharply:

"Who comes?"

A sense of bitter disappointment surged in Clem Hardacre as the voice reached him, for it was not the voice of the man whom he sought; and it had beside a ring of authority that comes only from conscious power and the habit of exercising it. As he stepped into the light of the fire he

looked at the man who stood there awaiting him, and gave a start, for the man was no stranger to him, then he spoke :

“ An old friend, Inspector Carne.”

The man so addressed took a quick step forward, and stared into Hardacre's face. The parka hood in which it was framed was a mass of hoar-frost. The scarf that shrouded mouth and nostrils was crusted with ice. The eyebrows were white with frozen moisture, and there were miniature icicles upon the eyelashes, from which the steady eyes looked out to meet his own ; but in spite of all, the man recognized him.

“ Clem Hardacre ! By all that's wonderful ! Man, where have you put yourself these three years ? ”

“ In the sunshine,” answered Hardacre as he took the hand which the other thrust towards him.

“ Where's that ? Not up here at any rate, or we'd have heard of you—as some of us wanted to pretty badly.”

“ No. I've been off your beat, down in the Pacific.”

“ But you're back, here ! Why ? Have you heard you're wanted ? ”

“ Wanted ? ” Clem Hardacre started as he echoed the word ; and Carne laughed.

“ Not in the professional sense. But there's news for you. I'll explain when you're unharnessed, and I'll say at once that I never was so glad to see a man in all my life before.”

"Generous of you to say that, Carne, in the face of what happened four years ago!"

"Bosh, Clem! That's as good as wiped out. I'll tell you later. I was thinking of myself when I spoke. I'm in no end of a mess, with a couple of invalids on my hands."

"A couple?"

"Yes! In the tent there. A break-through in the ice. You know the kind of thing! And one of the poor beggars has lost four toes, whilst the other looks like pneumonia."

But for the ice-stiff scarf about his mouth Clem Hardacre would have whistled, instead he said: "That's bad! Who are they?"

"You don't know them. They're since your time. But now you're here, I'll want your help."

The words, carelessly spoken, brought back to Clem Hardacre the remembrance of the trail he was on, and he turned abruptly to his dogs without answering. The significance of the action was not lost upon the Inspector, who watched him with thoughtful eyes until he had unharnessed and fed his team, then he spoke again:

"I suppose I can count on you, Clem?"

"No!" was the answer, its emphaticness losing nothing by its brevity.

"Why not?" asked the Inspector.

"Because I'm on urgent private affairs, Carne, affairs that won't brook delay."

"But a man's life may be involved——"

"I can't help that! On my side there's some-

thing that I count more than a man's life involved. You're within a few hours of help——"

"Yes, I know. There's a man of mine working down Black River to meet——"

"Name of Trevor?"

"Yes! Have you seen him?"

Hardacre nodded, then said: "You won't meet him again."

"What? Why?"

"He was shot dead a day or so ago!"

"Shot! Good God! Who did it? Do you know?"

"Yes! It was Gaston Jervaux!"

"Jervaux!" The Inspector stared at him with startled eyes. "The man who . . . who got away from you?"

"Yes! I'm on his trail now. I mistook your trail for his or I should not have come here!"

"It's a lucky thing you did," said the Inspector fervently. "Particularly in view of what happened to Trevor and of the job you're on. Tell me why you're following Jervaux. Is it the old business, or because of Trevor?"

"Neither!" answered Hardacre in a tone that made Inspector Carne lay a hand on his arm.

"Look here, Hardacre, old man, you've just got to tell me—for your own sake!"

Clem Hardacre stood considering a moment, then he said: "I don't know that I will. There are private reasons——"

"Private reasons! And you tell me the scoundrel shot Trevor dead. Man, you must know that

the public good comes before any private interests."

"Not in this case. But anyhow the public good will be served; for I shall shoot Jervaux on sight."

"You tell me that?" Inspector Carne laughed sharply. "I shan't let you do it, old man. You'll spoil everything if you do."

"No! I shall right a great wrong."

For a moment Carne watched him without speaking. Hardacre, without adding to what he had said, unwrapped the frozen scarf, changed his socks and moccasins, and carefully thawed out his eyelashes, and when the operation was ended, Carne laid a hand upon the other's arm.

"You've just got to tell me what's up, old man. Come and sit by the fire, and have a man to man talk. I've something important to tell you."

Yielding to the other's solicitation, Hardacre sat down on a sled drawn up in the warmth of a blanket screen, and waited for the officer to begin. The latter carefully packed his pipe and lit it, then spoke.

"It's about that old business of yours!"

Hardacre looked at him quickly, a question in his eyes.

"Yes! The Assistant-Commissioner now thinks he did you less than justice."

"Less than justice!" Clem Hardacre laughed mirthlessly as he cried the words. "He was d——d unjust."

"I think he guesses that now. But you mustn't carry it against him too much. He acted on the

facts as they appeared, and they, you will admit, were dead against you."

"What's induced the change of mind?" sneered the other.

"Ten months ago we snapped up that Swede who kept the road-house. You remember him—Big Ohlsen was the name he went by."

"So you found out he was a whisky-runner?"

The Inspector looked at him sharply. "You knew that, Hardacre?"

"Not till a week ago. I have evidence now that would help you to gather him in if the job wasn't already done."

"Where did you get it?"

"From Marie Jervaux."

"That woman who was supposed to have—er—bought you!" cried Carne in surprise.

"Yes! I found her dying, and deserted by the two men whom she had engaged, with the wolves watching round her camp. I nursed her till the end and got a signed confession."

"What was she doing up here?" asked the Inspector curiously.

"Hurrying to warn her brother that you fellows were after him."

"But we weren't, at least not particularly. We were after the dope-runners who've just flooded this end of the district during the last three months. We were beating the country right up to the Porcupine, and towards the border, for the thing was getting serious."

"Then you didn't suspect Jervaux?"

"Didn't know he was in the district, or we'd have gathered him out of hand. He hasn't been in evidence since your affair."

"And you weren't looking for anyone in particular?"

"No! There were a couple of new trading-posts we'd heard of——"

"Jervaux used them."

"You have proof of that? Did he own them?"

"I built them, and have a quarter share in them."

"You!" The Inspector's amazement was plain. "And Jervaux operated illicitly through them? I don't get you, Clem."

"But you will in a little while when you've heard the story I'm going to tell you. But about Big Ohlsen—tell me that first."

"There isn't much to tell! We took him red-handed and found evidence that he'd been in with the whisky-runners for years. It was a knock-out for most of us, for we'd all trusted the Swede, and there'd never been a breath of suspicion against him. The A.-C. remembered that it was at his place that you came a mucker, and that you had sworn you'd been hocussed some way, and he questioned the Swede closely. He couldn't get much out of him beyond an admission that you'd had no whisky at the road-house, and that it was possible that Jervaux's sister had bribed his Indian woman to dope your coffee——"

"It was Big Ohlsen himself who did the doping!"

"The deuce! Well, we've got him at Stony

Mountain and we'll be able to make him own up. The Indian woman vamoosed when we collected Ohlsen, and we haven't been able to find her or we might have got the truth that way ; but anyhow the A.-C. found cause to revise his estimate of your business ; and those of us who'd known you were given private instructions to keep an eye lifting for you, and I can assure you that most of your old pals have kept both eyes wide open for you since, because we wanted you back ; for some of us never believed you were to blame. We just knew you couldn't be—and later, when we got that d——d Swede, we saw the thing might have happened to any of us."

The man whom he addressed was a little moved by the words, but spoke formally : " It's very good of you to say——"

" Good be hanged ! Cut that rot out, Clem. We're talking man to man, pal to pal, and frosty frills of that sort aren't needed. Now pitch your yarn and let me know what new devilry of his has set you chasing Jervaux."

Clem Hardacre considered for a moment. There was much that would have to be told sooner or later when the Inspector heard of the attack on the post ; and there was nothing to be gained and much to be lost by waiting until official questioning brought the facts to light. From that point of view his meeting with Carne was almost providential, and whilst there were some things that he would rather have kept back, he resolved to lay the whole of the facts bare, and trust to

the Inspector's judgment as to the weight of culpability. So he began his story, beginning with the meeting at "The House of a Hundred Delights," and carrying it on right to his meeting with Trevor, without any interruption from his deeply interested listener, who made his first break in at that point.

"You suspected then that this Carlowe and his associates had made you a catspaw?"

"Something like that!"

The Inspector laughed quietly. "I guess that when they stroked the cat they never thought it might be a tiger! Go on, Clem."

Hardacre resumed, and there was no further interruption until he had told how he had watched by Marie Jervaux in her extremity, when Carne broke in on the story:

"Great Jove! It must have tried you out all the way, knowing what you knew——"

"It was the only thing to do!" broke in the other. "After all, I suppose the woman wasn't much to blame. She did it for her brother."

"Whom we will hang by the neck till he is dead," said the Inspector quietly. "Go on!"

Hardacre resumed, and the other listened until he told of the arrival of Father Grouard and himself at the post in the midst of the Indian attack, then he interrupted sharply: "You say old Mikaket's lot had broken out——"

"They were attacking the post in force! At least seven of them are dead!"

"But heavens, man, this is serious! There hasn't been an outbreak for years!"

"It is part of Jervaux's devilry. He doped them with whisky and inspired them to make the attack and sack the post. But Father Grouard is up there, and he'll be able to keep Mikaket's lot quiet."

Inspector Carne was not consoled. "I ought to get up there," he said with a glance back towards the tent. "Can't I leave you in charge here, Clem, whilst I——"

"You can't!" said Hardacre abruptly. "I'm not under discipline; and I go my own way. You'll know why when I've finished my story."

"Then get on with it, Clem. I must consider what I can do."

Hardacre resumed his story, and the Inspector listened with amazed ears until he had finished, then he spoke sharply: "Clem, you must not kill Jervaux!"

"But I will," answered Hardacre with a bitter laugh.

"You know what that will mean—if it happens in the Territory!"

"Yes!"

"We should have to vindicate the law. You know that better than I can tell you. The jury might bring it in extenuating circumstances, but ——" He interrupted himself, and slapped his knee as a sudden thought occurred to him. "I've got it!"

"What?"

"The idea of a better way."

Clem Hardacre waited in sceptical silence, and after a moment Carne explained.

"You got Jervaux once, old man, and lost him. His life is doubly forfeit to the law now, and if you could get him again——"

"I'll get him, if I follow him to the pole," replied the other grimly.

"I don't mean that way," said Carne quietly. "If you would stop here with these invalids of mine, I would go out and gather him myself; but you won't agree to that, I know, so I suggest that you shall go after him with a legal right to gather him——"

"How?"

"I can swear you in. Make you a special constable as poor Trevor did Ladronne, then you can go after Jervaux—and bring him back to justice." He waited a moment, but Hardacre did not speak, and he resumed urgently: "It's the better way, old man. You'll rid the earth of a scoundrel as surely as if you got him with a gun, and you'll free that girl without staining your hands. After all, it's one thing to bring a man to justice; and another thing to shoot him as an act of private vengeance."

"Yes, but——"

"You know I'm right, Clem. It's better all round to do it this way. Those Indians will think nothing of the business if you kill him. They'll think a whole lot if we put him in the dock with old Mikaket and hang him afterwards. It will ensure the peace of this district for years, and

impress the natives with the fact that the law can't be wantonly transgressed. And, besides, if Jervaux goes to Regina after all, and through your agency——" He broke off. "I'll say no more. You know just as much as I can tell you."

He sat there watching the other's face as the firelight revealed it to him. It was tense, and there was an absent look in the steel-blue eyes. For quite a long time Clem Hardacre sat without replying. The silence of the wilderness enfolded the camp; and Carne did not break it. He had shot his bolt, and awaited the issue, knowing he could do nothing more, and quite unable to divine what his friend's decision would be. But as the answer was delayed he began to be afraid, and to cast about in his mind for any further means of turning the other from the crime he contemplated. He might arrest him and—— A coal popped suddenly, breaking the intense silence, then Clem Hardacre moved sharply. "I'll do it, Carne," he said in a shaking voice. "Swear me in!"

"Thank God!" cried Carne, in a voice that revealed how much relieved he was by the decision.

"The oath of service! Then I'll turn in, Carne, and get away as soon as the dogs are fit. I may have a long trail to follow—though I fancy I shan't have. Either way, the sooner I can start the better."

Then in the silence of the wilderness, with the firelight glowing on his tense face, he repeated the oath of allegiance and office that both of them

knew by heart. "*I, Clement Hardacre, solemnly swear that I will faithfully, diligently, and impartially execute and perform the duties required of me as a member of The Royal North-West Mounted Police Force and will well and truly obey and perform all lawful orders and instructions which I shall receive as such without fear, favour or affection of or toward any person. So help me God.*"

And as the last words died on the stillness Hardacre stood for a moment, staring with enigmatic eyes in the darkness, then turned abruptly away, that even his friend might not see his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRAIL OF JUSTICE

ACROSS the small barren where lay the trail that he had followed the previous night, Clem Hardacre toiled through the "strong cold." The temperature in itself was comparatively nothing. A careful man may travel at a temperature of fifty degrees below zero without adding very greatly to the risks of the trail, and without much more than the usual discomfort of winter journeying. That is when the air is still; but when it is moving, when there is wind, the conditions are vastly different. Then the bitter cold is accentuated. The wind seems to render all protective devices nugatory, and drives the cold like a piercing sword to the very marrow, so that no amount of exercise can keep alive the grateful glow of warmth. It does more than that. It adds an invisible weight to hinder the going. It flings granules of icy snow in the face, its steady resistance wears the spirit and tries the strength as nothing else will so long as travelling is possible at all.

All this Hardacre was conscious of as he bowed his head and toiled across the barren. He was numbed to the bone, utterly wearied by the wind's

steadfast opposition, his eyes smarting and watering and the lashes freezing, and yet he would not desist, or turn aside, from a trail that now was a trail of duty rather than of vengeance. The wind and cold dulled his faculties, yet he held to that trail going straight across the open space dimly visible in the ghostly light, knowing that he had little time to waste.

If Gaston Jervaux learned that his plans had gone awry, and that the trading-post had not been destroyed, he might take fright and run to the border in order to save himself. Once he reached there the law of the Mounted would not run, and he might be lost in the great world, as he had been once before. This thought kept Hardacre going when otherwise the cold would have driven him to camp, and it helped him to renew his energy as it flagged under the wind's wearing resistance. At all costs he must find out in which direction Gaston Jervaux would ultimately turn; and no matter what happened to himself, prevent him from reaching the border and disappearing into space once more.

The sun lifted itself for a very brief time above the southern horizon, and with its coming the cruel wind died away, making travelling easier. So far he had followed the trail toilsomely and without any particular regard to the direction in which it was trending. But as with the dying away of the wind he quickened his pace, his mind grew less sluggish and quite suddenly he made the discovery that instead of moving straight

across the barren the trail was steadily veering in an easterly direction away from the direction of the international boundary.

The discovery interested him greatly. It showed that whatever subtle purpose dictated Jervaux's movements, he was evidently under no apprehension that the flight to the border would become an urgent necessity. Having made this discovery, Hardacre grew more alert and instead of merely following the trail strove to anticipate the direction. Presently the trail left the barren, and passed in the direction of some sparse timber where at the edge of a small creek he came upon the ashes of a camp-fire. They were yet warm, proving that the man who had rested there had not been gone many hours. Probably Jervaux had camped there on the previous night, and had made a late start, being evidently in no great hurry to reach his destination.

Cheered by this knowledge, he went forward at a quickened pace. Perhaps in a little time, by nightfall possibly, he might have the luck to overtake his quarry, surprising him in camp. He hoped so, for a long winter trail was not alluring; and the longer the chase was drawn out the greater were the chances of Gaston Jervaux's ultimate escape.

The trail still veered till it reached a point where it turned almost due north; and then quite suddenly it descended the bank of a small river, which from its direction was the one on which Carne's camp was pitched. As he saw that, Hardacre had an

idea which brought to him a quick feeling of apprehension. Had Gaston Jervaux somehow become aware of the presence of Carne and his companions ?

It was more than possible, he thought. Recalling the abrupt change in the trail that he had marked, he was almost convinced that it was so. Jervaux had been following the river, had evidently meant to do for some time, but, learning that there were other travellers in the neighbourhood, had taken to the barren and had made a very considerable circuit in order to avoid them. That seemed almost certain, and the question that followed was whether Jervaux was aware that the party which had driven him from the more direct trail was a patrol of the Mounted Police ? That seemed a more doubtful point. To learn that fact he would have had to go closer to the camp than his trail showed he had been, and it was probable that merely desiring secrecy for his movements, he had avoided crossing the trail of a party whose presence he had not expected in the neighbourhood.

One thing Clem Hardacre congratulated himself upon. His quarry could not possibly know that the man whom he had wronged was at his heels. His leisurely travel showed that, and as the trail turned north-west it was borne on Hardacre that the man ahead was merely working round either to the trading-post or to Mikaket's camp. As he realized that, his apprehensions quickened. If Jervaux, who had deliberately absented himself from the neighbourhood whilst the attack was made,

reached the camp before he was overtaken and learned the truth, he might instantly flee.

Scarcely had the thought occurred to him when he left the trail and began to move in a direction which was calculated to intercept this veering trail; which at any rate would put him to the west of the man who until now he had steadily followed. Then he urged the dogs forward, travelled till the stars were in the sky; and was on the point of making camp when he came on another trail in the snow.

Amazed at the sight, he made a careful examination of it. It was the trail of a small sled with four dogs, driven tandem in the Indian fashion; whilst Jervaux's team numbered six and was driven in pairs. This new trail troubled him considerably; for it ran in a direction that must cross the line of Gaston Jervaux's march; and if it were one of Mikaket's Indians, and he and Jervaux met, then almost certainly the Canadian must become aware of the failure of his plans, and at the same time he might learn that already the pursuit was out. He stood considering the situation for a little time and looked round the ghostly waste with something like despair in his eyes. If Jervaux, being warned, succeeded in getting away——

The thought stirred him to activity. He would not make camp as he intended. He would push on for an hour longer, making steadily to the westward, so as to emerge somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Indian encampment; and perhaps,

after all, he might be in time. He pressed on, travelling steadily, consumed by anxiety ; and before the hour was over stumbled on another trail which was bearing in the direction in which he himself was going. A close scrutiny convinced him that it was the trail of the team whose presence in the wilderness he had earlier discovered, though now it was heading in the other direction, and at a wide angle from the earlier line of march. Were his troubled anticipations to be proved correct, after all ; or was he worrying himself about some Indian trapper engaged in following his trap-line ? He could not tell at the moment, but since the trail was on his own line of march, it would not take long to discover the truth ; since if he kept on, in the latter event he must soon come upon evidence of the fact.

The country was an undulating one, interspersed with small hills, and he had just worked round one of the latter when he came upon a camp where a man was engaged in preparing a meal over a fire. In the first glance he guessed the man for an Indian, for his fire, notwithstanding a plentitude of wood, was small and round, very different from the big fires that white men following the trail customarily make. The man, busy over his tasks, was taken utterly by surprise—Hardacre was almost upon him before the other was aware of his presence ; but though surprised, the man showed no concern and responded to his greeting in the tongue of Mikaket's tribe calmly enough.

Hardacre, after the first greeting, without invita-

tion, began to unharness his dogs with the deliberate intention of sharing the man's camp. As he worked, he watched the man carefully; and once or twice surprised a disturbed look in the native's face; though when the white man had finished his tasks and having cooked his evening meal, was eating it on the other side of the fire, the Indian showed neither curiosity nor concern. Until the meal was over neither spoke, but when Hardacre lit his pipe, he opened the conversation.

"My brother is of Mikaket's village?"

"No!" answered the native quietly.

Hardacre did not believe him, but did not say so. The fact that the man should lie, as he was sure he did, warned him that he was on his guard.

"Then my brother takes a long journey or follows the trap-line?"

"Yes. The trap-line. There much fur here."

Clem Hardacre glanced at the sled. There were neither pelts nor unskinned animals upon it, and he was sure that again the man lied.

"The traps have been empty to-day, then?"

For one second the Indian's eyes flashed; and though his face remained impassive, the white man knew that he was finding the probing questions a little disconcerting.

"It is the bad fortune," answered the Indian. "A carcajou destroyed many of the traps and devoured the catch."

"That is unfortunate," commented Hardacre, and was silent for a little while watching the Indian, who was staring into the fire. Then, knowing

quite well that the man meant to tell him nothing, he said sharply: "I am of the police." The Indian's impassive face revealed nothing, and there was not so much as the flicker of an eyelid as Hardacre made the announcement, but a second later he gave an almost imperceptible start, as Hardacre continued: "I am looking for that white man whom you travelled east to meet."

"There was no white man!" answered the Indian stolidly.

"He was the man from the store on Black River," said Hardacre, deliberately ignoring the other's denial. "He shot a policeman and he will have to die."

The Indian grunted, but gave no other sign of emotion; and the white man spoke again: "Those who help a killer to get away—or who travel far to warn him, in the eyes of the police are liable to be arrested for the crime."

"Ugh!" grunted the native.

"And that being so, my friend, I ask you whom have you been out there to meet?"

He jerked his head backward along the trail as he spoke, but the Indian maintained his stolid impassivity, and from any emotion that he displayed he might have been as deaf as a piece of rock.

"Neither Mikaket nor that white man back there can save you, if you do not tell the truth."

Still the Indian would not commit himself. "I am not of Mikaket's people. I have seen no white man."

Clem Hardacre's face set hard. He had no means of making the man speak and to arrest him would be a hindrance to the accomplishment of his own purpose. But before he gave up the inquisition he asked one more question :

" You went to warn him that the white *klootch* was not at the camp ? "

Again the sombre eyes flashed, and Hardacre knew the truth, though the native denied it.

" No ! "

The white man lapsed into silence and sat staring in the fire, his mind busy with this new situation. Almost certainly Gaston Jervaux was warned that his nefarious plan had gone awry, and the question was what course he would follow now. It was not an easy matter to anticipate the action he would be likely to take. He might take the risk of returning to the fort in the hope of carrying Nancy with him across the border ; or he might set out to secure his own safety quite regardless of the other things he had at stake. To Hardacre the first course seemed the likelier since at present Jervaux was probably unaware that he was already being pursued ; and he might be tempted to make the dash to retrieve his failing fortunes. But it was impossible to be certain what so tortuous a mind as the Canadian's would decide to do ; and the only safe course to pursue was to get on his trail and follow it at express speed. To do that both himself and his dogs must have rest, and without another word to the Indian he slid into his sleeping-bag and composed himself for slumber.

Worn out with his long exertions he was not long before he fell asleep. At the end of three or four hours he awoke to find the Aurora glowing overhead, and as he looked carelessly round the camp he grew suddenly alert. The two sleds were there in the shadow of the trees, the dogs lay in slumber, feet and nose tucked in, protecting the tail carefully adjusted over all; but there was no sign of the Indian. As he made that discovery he sat up, and looked carefully round. The man was not there. He waited a few minutes to see if the native would return; and as he did not do so, he got out of his sleeping-bag, and made a swift examination of the camp.

Within two minutes he found the Indian's trail. It led back on the one which he had made in coming to the camp. It was easy enough to determine that with certainty, since only one set of footmarks led away from the camp, and instantly the question arose, Why had the Indian gone back on his trail, leaving his dogs behind? His mind found the answer at once. Beyond doubt to warn Jervaux! The significance of that only likely solution of the problem of the Indian's absence was borne on him instantly. It meant that the man whom he was pursuing was no more than a few miles away, or the Indian would not have left his dogs behind. Undoubtedly the native had hoped to accomplish his purpose and return before he himself was awake.

As he realized that, Clem Hardacre without further waste of time began to prepare to follow. He

worked quickly and in less than half an hour was on the track of the Indian, following the trail to the point where he had struck the previous night and then branching from his own line of travel to that of the native's. He travelled swiftly over the packed snow, his heart hot and eager within him, and he had gone perhaps seven miles when in the mysterious light of the Aurora he caught sight of a figure of a man moving shadow-like across the snow. The man apparently saw him at the same moment, for he turned suddenly from the trail into the deep shadow of the wood, and a second later was lost to view.

That it was the returning Indian, Hardacre had no doubt at all ; and a moment later he was further assured of the fact as the unearthly stillness was broken by the sound of a rifle shot. The whine of the bullet, however, was missing and he kept on his way, not troubling about the man in the wood, who doubtless was firing as a signal to the man whom he had been to warn. That thought was confirmed by two further shots, which reverberated through the wood, without any indication that he himself was the target at which they were fired ; and knowing that now Jervaux must be doubly warned, he pressed his team in the hope of soon overtaking the now flying criminal.

Three-quarters of an hour later he came on a deserted camp where the ashes of the fire showed red in the darkness. He stopped for a brief examination. The tracks in the snow told him that the Indian had been there, and the trail of a sled

leading from the camp revealed the direction of Gaston Jervaux's flight. He followed eagerly, and as he raced strove to recall the salient features of the country through which he moved. In founding the post he had studied such maps as were available closely; and now as he travelled he was able to vision them. There were several tributaries of the main river besides that which Jervaux had followed when he left Mikaket's encampment, and it was probable that the fugitive was making for one of them, in order to reach the Black River and so win a clear and easy run to the border. If only in some way he could intercept the man and turn him aside, then the end he himself sought would be almost won.

Pushing steadily forward on a trail that the other had to break, he knew that he must be gaining on the man. But the start that Jervaux had set him in front enabled him to decide the course, and if once he reached his objective then it was possible that he would draw rapidly ahead. Thinking this, he came to a point where a low range of hills sent the trail farther eastward, and as he realized this Clem Hardacre's heart leaped with sudden exultation. Gaston Jervaux's knowledge was imperfect or he had made a mistake, for as he recalled the map, the tributary that undoubtedly the fleeing man was seeking lay to the west of the hills in front, whilst eastward ran a wide barren where in the daylight the man must sooner or later reveal himself.

For a moment he was in doubt what course to

pursue. If he struck west he might reach the river first and get between the fleeing man and the border. But with a man like Jervaux, experienced in the wilderness, there were objections to that course. If he found himself not pursued, the French-Canadian might surmise what had happened and turn northward for the Porcupine or southward for the Yukon and so avoid the trap laid for him. There was nothing for it apparently but to follow the hot trail. That way he could be sure that he would not lose the man in the wilderness, and whichever point of the compass Jervaux chose, he himself would be at his heels, following swiftly in the trail which the other had to break. There could be no escape for the Canadian now. In a few hours, in a day, two days at most, he would wear the man down and take him as the wolves take the moose they bring to bay in the deep snow at last. And with this thought in his mind he shouted exultant encouragement to his dogs, and followed the trail eastward of the hills, towards the great barren.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TERROR OF THE BARRENS

THE desolation was complete. The snow-covered hills on the left with a meagre scattering of pines seemed to be the only elevation, whilst everywhere else spread the great barren, deadly white in its mantling snow, apparently level, but in reality with many hollows and depressions that were not visible to a man standing on its rim. Here and there a stunted spruce reaching perhaps half-way to a man's waist protruded through the snow, and in other places there were wind-rows flung against hidden boulders or some unevenness of the ground, but for the rest there was only the white plain running to the horizon, with the wind blowing across it, making a hissing sound like some venomous thing.

Standing in the lee of the hills, in the cold light of the morning, Clem Hardacre considered the white immensity from the foreground to the point where the snow faded in the line that was neither snow nor sky. Nothing moved on all the wide expanse; and in neither earth nor heaven was there any sign of life beyond himself and his team. But somewhere in that wide desolation and stillness

was movement and life. Below a level of sight was another man with brain alert and with watchful eyes tracking at the head of a dog-team, but who gave no sign of his presence in the waste, except the indubitable evidence of the sled trail, which a little distance from where Hardacre stood faded into the prevailing whiteness.

He knew that the man was there, but he could not see him. He listened, but no sound of him or of his dogs made itself heard through the hiss of the wind as it swept over the snow. For a little time he watched, hoping against hope that the sign he sought would be given him; then a little wearily he began to follow the trail which ran straight out from the hills into the barren. The wind blowing across the great waste seemed a malignant thing. Its hissing the voice of "the wind beast" of which the Indians speak. It forced him to draw his parka hood closely about his face; and in a little while it numbed all the front of him as he marched straight into its teeth. His dogs, following the trail of the invisible quarry, moved in a little cloud of steam constantly whisked away by the wind; and they also moved wearily, for as they knew as well as their master that a trail in the barren might be an endless one, moving in great circles towards a frozen death——

As he marched Clem Hardacre's brain, a little dulled by the cold, explained the invisibility of the man whom he was hunting. Across the barren ran some river in the depression of the shallow banks of which Jervaux had hidden himself,

travelling out of sight ; or waiting to kill the man who by this time he must have seen if he had looked across the waste in the light of morning. Hardacre was perfectly aware of the danger he faced as, clinging to the sledge, he followed the trail.

One of the fantastic wind-rows might conceal Jervaux, or behind one of the snow-covered boulders he might be sighting him with a rifle. But that was a hazard to be taken ; and the answer was not without a hope that the fugitive would be in such haste to leave his pursuer behind that he would not linger to shoot or to take the risk of a shot himself.

And for a time the hope was justified. For two miles he followed that wavering trail across the waste, then he came to a depression in the surface of the snow that indicated a stream ran there in the summer, when the air was cloudy with countless mosquitoes. Now its surface was frozen, and the snow lay thick upon it ; and a long snow-wreath crowned the bank down which Jervaux's trail dropped to the level of the river, along which the trail now ran. Clem Hardacre followed it ; and made the discovery that he could not see over the edge of the banks with their piled-up snow. The explanation of Jervaux's disappearance from the landscape being proved to be what he had anticipated it would be, he pushed on, following the trail along the river's winding course ; but now and again mounting the bank to make sure that his quarry had not left the river to double back across the barren towards the hills.

It was when he was making one of these ascents that his first mishap occurred. A rifle cracked somewhere in the waste, and before he had time to locate the sound, or mark the little drift of smoke that would have indicated the position of the aggressor, something struck him in the upper part of the left shoulder, swinging him round, and sending him toppling down the bank out of sight of the attacker.

He knew what had happened. Jervaux, sighting him, had fired and the bullet had struck him, how severely he could not at the moment tell. Sprawling in the snow, he called to his dogs, and they lay down waiting his pleasure. For a moment or two he did not move; then he strove to ascertain what damage he had suffered. A cautious movement of the arm assured him that no bone had been touched; and with that certain fact ascertained he gave a little laugh; and stripped the protecting cover from his rifle.

"Forewarned is forearmed!" he whispered to himself and half expecting a further attack, he crouched in the snow.

Having himself been fired on and wounded, he would now be justified in shooting in turn. Not even Carne would deny him that right, for, though the Mounted Police often became targets, and it was against the code for them to become the aggressors in a shooting match, they must perforce, when attacked, defend their lives. He exulted as he considered the situation. Now at any moment he himself might become the attacker, and make an

end of the man whom he hated with a consuming hatred. Placing himself in a convenient position he waited ; every sense alert, his finger on the trigger, hoping that Jervaux would return to learn the result of his shot. The Canadian, however, did not do so, and after a little while, Hardacre laid aside his rifle and as well as he could investigated his hurt, and rejoiced to find that it was not serious, being no more than a flesh wound. Keeping a bright look-out, he dressed it as well as he could ; and this done crept to the top of the bank and peeped cautiously over.

At first he could see no sign of Jervaux, but he watched carefully and presently caught sight of something white that blended with the snow and which moved just above its level. It might have been a ptarmigan, but after watching it carefully a couple of minutes, he knew that it was not, for it followed a wavering course and once lifted itself well above the snow-level, revealing itself as the rime-covered hood of a parka. There was a surge of fierce exultation in his heart as he slid his rifle forward, following that moving blotch across the snow. Soon it would be lifted again, and then the man would be delivered into his hands.

He waited, his eyes fixed on the top of the receding hood. His moment would come with some inequality of the bank, some break in the drift that at that point marked the river's course. The seconds went by with leaden feet, and then the whole of Jervaux's head was lifted into view. Hardacre slipped his hand from its mitten, sighted carefully—

and hesitated. His enemy was in view for a full two minutes, but he did not fire, ceased even to follow the head bobbing up and down along the snow-level. His hand slid back in the mitten; and a look of resolution came on his face.

"No!" he whispered to himself. "I'll take him alive." He slipped back down the bank, and standing upright considered the position. It was evident that Gaston Jervaux was under the impression that he had either killed or seriously incapacitated his pursuer which in the circumstances was practically the same thing. The fact that he had not returned to learn the truth or in any way attempted to follow up his success proved that. That being so, he would go forward carelessly and with confidence; and perhaps as the day waned and he discovered that the way followed was taking him farther into the wilderness, he might begin to retrace his steps. At any rate, sooner or later, he would be driven to make some sort of camp, and if he built a fire, to betray his whereabouts, it would be easy to surprise him.

Reflecting further upon the position, he decided that the best thing was to allow the fleeing man to draw ahead a little. So long as he followed the meandering course of this river he could not possibly turn west towards the trading-post; and if he discovered his mistake and leaving the river reversed his course and attempted to make for the border, he must inevitably betray himself to one who watched for him.

Assured of this he began to follow slowly on the

trail, stopping from time to time to assure himself by careful reconnaissance that Jervaux had not taken to the open barren. Many times whilst the brief daylight lasted he saw his quarry quite plainly, and once so much did the river wind and double, something less than eight hundred yards in a crow's flight separated them from each other. Jervaux's carelessness proved that he felt secure. Not once amongst the occasions in which Hardacre saw him did he appear to look back on the trail in expectation of pursuit. Beyond question he believed that once for all he had got rid of the tracker.

About noon there was a sudden rise in temperature, that brought an anxious look to Hardacre's face, for a rise in temperature in those latitudes, as he knew full well, is the precursor of an inevitable fall of snow. The rise was maintained until the sun began to dip below the level of the southern horizon, and the sky became overcast. With the going of the sun the wind began to rise, at first in gusts that swept the hard granular particles of snow from the open barren and flung it in clouds over the level of the river bank, as by the lunges of some giant broom. The gusts grew fiercer and more persistent, and presently brought with them new snow that swooped down from the open skies like hard hail.

Anxiety mounted in Hardacre's heart. A storm was coming and to be caught by a storm in the open barren was to hobnob with death. He knew that Jervaux would be forced to camp, and he himself began to cast about for a shelter. It was some

little time before he found it, a little valley, a depression in the wind-swept space of the barren but a short distance from the river. There he found an almost matted growth of the stunted firs which defy the winds of the North and flourish with maimed but indomitable life.

There were many dead trees among them, and whilst the gathering storm shrieked across the waste and flung volleys of hard snow to destroy what life dared to face it, he built a fire and made such a camp as was possible in the shelter that the valley and the dwarf wood afforded. Driven by harsh necessity he worked fast and hard, banking the snow with a snow-shoe to make a screen against the wind ; fixing a blanket between two of the dwarf trees to throw down the heat, cutting more wood to replenish the fire in case the storm should be a long one, doing all that he could think of to make his camp a sheltered spot ; and not once did he think of Gaston Jervaux, farther out in the waste fronting the teeth of the storm.

But when he crouched in the heat of the fire, with the wind rattling the tops of the firs, and the snow-dust spitting and hissing viciously as it encountered the fire, his thoughts went out to the man whom he had followed so far ; and who, as the stiffness and soreness of his shoulder reminded him, had sought his life. Had he also found shelter ? If not, what was happening to him ?

As he fed the pot upon the fire with snow to melt for his coffee, with the fine dust whirling round him in a smother, he found himself recalling stories of

men who, caught in these Northern storms, had perished forlornly in the cold. There was that Mounted Police patrol of four, all experienced men, who had perished in such a storm as this as was now hurtling across the barren. There was that trapper whom he had found in the snow less than half a mile from his own cabin, and that heroic priest who, hurrying to carry the sacrament to a dying woman, had been lost in a sudden blizzard. Stories of such deaths were common enough, and as he listened to the wind shrieking triumphantly over the waste and watched the snowy cloud whirling around the tops of the dwarf wood that gave him shelter, he knew that, failing some such refuge, Gaston Jervaux was in the worst plight of his adventurous career ; facing death at the hands of an enemy whom no man can hope to fight successfully in the open. The thought disturbed him more than a little because of his resolve to take the Canadian back alive ; but as he could do nothing for the moment, he put it from him and set himself to last out the storm with as little discomfort as was possible in the circumstances.

Having eaten, he crept into his sleeping-bag and composed himself to sleep. After a few hours he rose and replenished the fire, then seating himself with his back against the sled, sat smoking, busy with thoughts that embraced both the past and the future. The storm showed no signs of breaking when the wan daylight came, and whilst it raged, he was hid there inactive, unable to follow his quest, unable except at his imminent peril to leave the

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confines of his little camp. But the North teaches a man patience, begets a stolidity in trying circumstances ; and schools the spirit of men until they are able to wait as the Indians wait, imperturbably, stoically, without any desire to hurry the moment of destiny. And Clem Hardacre, notwithstanding his ardent nature, had learned that art of waiting ; and held up as he was, used the delay to the best advantage, eating and drinking and sleeping most of the time in which the storm chained him to camp.

Sometime in the course of the second night the storm blew itself out ; and in the late dawn he wakened out of his sleep to the consciousness of a world that by contrast with the uproar that had previously prevailed was appallingly silent. Not a rustle broke the almost frightful stillness, and as he lifted his head from the sleeping-bag, above the tops of the ragged dwarf pines he saw a green-blue sky, frostily clear, unbroken by the slightest sign of cloud. As he crept out of the sleeping-bag, he touched one of the nearer trees, which seemed to vibrate resonantly in the tense still air, and as he stood upright from somewhere out in the waste came a sudden mournful howl which seemed to flood the frozen world with infinite sorrow.

Hurriedly throwing some sticks upon the fire, he slipped on his snow-shoes, very conscious of the soreness and stiffness of his left shoulder, and grabbing his rifle, moved out of the wood. In the comparatively brief time that the storm had lasted an amazing amount of snow had been added to the

white pall that covered the land ; and as it had no crust, the going was neither easy nor swift. But presently he stood at the head of the little valley and looked across the waste.

As he did so a sun of molten gold swung low in the southern horizon, cold as the dead moon itself, and lifted above the waste he saw the hills which he had left behind two days before. In the diamond clearness they seemed amazingly near ; and momentarily forgetting the winding way of the river-trail he was astonished at the little way he had travelled from them. But a second later, as he turned and looked towards the heart of the barren, a moving object caught his eye perhaps half a mile away in a straight line. Whether it was wolf or dog he could not at first make out, and putting his hand to his mouth he shouted to arrest the creature's attention.

In the intense stillness his voice was like a trumpet, and that the creature heard him was proved by the fact that it halted suddenly and looked round. He shouted again, and began to walk in the direction of the animal. Then it saw him, and wallowing in the uncrusted snow it began to move towards him. He knew then that it was no wolf, and divined instantly that somewhere out there in the waste there had been tragic happenings. As he drew nearer the dog began to sidle away from him ; but taking no notice of it, he marched on to the place where he had first observed it ; and stared at the trail which the dog had left behind for a moment, then moved on once more, following the animal's meandering trail. He took no precautions.

In his heart he knew that he had need of none, since that masterless dog now following at some distance behind him was living evidence of the tragedy that had occurred.

Quarter of an hour's heavy snow-shoe work brought him to a place where the frozen river made a double turn like the letter S, and in the second turn, under the shelter of the bank, he came upon five more dogs nosing about a couple of snow-covered mounds, one of them larger than the other. Contrary to the custom of their kind, they did not snarl or bare their fangs as he approached; but withdrew a little way and squatting on their haunches watched him as he moved forward to inspect.

The bigger mound, as he knew, was the sled, and from the paw marks upon it, it was evident that the dogs had been endeavouring to get at the food with which it was laden. The second and smaller mound was practically untouched, though there was evidence that one of the dogs had nosed it; and that more than one had walked round and round it, whilst not daring to approach too near. Stooping, he brushed the snow away and exposed first a brown blanket frozen stiff, and then a rabbit-skin robe. As he reached the second covering, he hesitated for a second and then wrenched it clear. Beneath was the still form of a man, his face three-quarters hidden in the hood of his fur parka which was covered with the rime of his frozen breath. He thrust the hood back, and looked into the face of the man whom he had not seen since that fateful night at Big Ohlsen's road-house, four years

before. The eyes were closed. The dark saturnine face extraordinarily peaceful ; but of a marble pallor that told its own tale. The North, implacable and pitiless, had exacted the vengeance which was denied to men ; and taking in its net of cold this man who fled from human justice, had held him until death had released him.

For a minute, two minutes, Clem Hardacre stared into that pallid face, a bleak light in his eyes, and with many emotions flooding his heart ; then suddenly he remembered Nancy Carlowe ; and standing to his feet, looked out across the waste prismatic in the glow of the low sun and from his lips broke a whisper :

“ Thank God ! ”

For whilst the North cheated him of vengeance, he knew that it had saved the girl whom he loved from a humiliation the memory of which must have lasted through all the years of life.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE TRAIL

IN the trading-post on Black River Inspector Carne sat in front of the stove talking with Nancy. He had been there for a whole day, having secured the help of Mikaket's Indians, who, cowed and feared at the remembrance of their own transgressions, had been only too eager to serve him by conveying his helpless companions to the post. And Nancy, notwithstanding that her father was implicated in the trouble for which Black Georges had already been placed under arrest, found his presence reassuring and comforting. When she heard that Clem Hardacre on the pursuit of Jervaux had taken the oath of service it had lifted a load from her mind ; for now, as she realized, the trail of vengeance had become the trail of justice and that whatever happened must necessarily happen through Gaston Jervaux's resistance of arrest, in which case her lover would be held blameless. Further, Carne's whole-hearted belief in his friend was wonderfully helpful in keeping her natural fears in check.

" You think that Mr. Hardacre will be safe ? " she inquired as she stared into the stove.

"Haven't a doubt of it," answered the Inspector cheerfully. "He'll get that Jervaux and bring him in if the fellow's above the earth. There isn't a better trailer in the North; and it was a shocking loss to the Mounted when that Jervaux crowd threw him out of his stride. But for that he'd have been well on his way to the Assistant-Commissioner's job, and as it is, if he comes back to us, it will be as an inspector. We shall owe him that much, since he was just about to be promoted four years ago."

"And if he brings Gaston Jervaux back?"

"Then Gaston Jervaux will go down to headquarters to be tried and hanged as high as Haman," answered Carne cheerfully, forgetting in what relation Nancy stood to the man of whom he spoke.

Nancy started and her face paled a little. The Inspector caught the look, and remembered. "I was forgetting that—a—er—— But I shouldn't worry about that scoundrel if I were you, girl. You will be well quit of him; and for both your sakes it is better that the Mounted should hang him than that Hardacre should himself be the executioner, as he would be most certainly if I hadn't re-enlisted him for the time being."

"Yes! Yes!" answered Nancy with emphasis. She was silent a moment, then she looked towards the bunk where Jacob Carlowe lay sleeping.

"My father," she began falteringly. "What ———"

"Don't worry about him," said the Inspector

with a smile. "It's a case in which I'm going to exercise my discretion. From what Father Grouard, who is something of a doctor, tells me, he is likely to be something of an invalid for a considerable time, and I don't know that we want to crowd the prison hospital with people who aren't likely to trouble the Territory again. I shall give him a ticket to clear out, as we did the undesirables on the Yukon in the gold rush, and Clem will be able to get him across the border. Black Georges I shall hold. He's been at the game before and he deserves what's coming to him just as Gaston Jervaux does. Quite apart from what has happened here, they have both been wanted for some time; and the shooting of Trevor was a dastardly business, in which the only persons who come out with any credit are Jean Ladronne and Trevor himself. The poor chap didn't know what he was up against, or he'd have handled Gaston Jervaux a little more cautiously. There are those of us who would have known what to expect; for Jervaux is a very devil, as Trevor ought to have known after that first gun-business. But it is nothing against a dead man's memory that he was too brave."

"No!" agreed Nancy softly; then added, "I hope from my heart that Mr. Hardacre will be careful."

"Careful! Clem Hardacre!" The Inspector laughed almost gaily. "That's contrary to the man's nature, my dear girl. He'll go bald-headedly for Jervaux, and my one anxiety is that he may be tempted in the last moment to put the blackguard

permanently out of action. He's a dead shot and when gun-fire is forward it's not in him to be careful."

"You mean you are afraid that Cle—Mr. Hardacre will kill the man."

"Honestly I am! But I shall find it in my heart to forgive him if he does; though all the same I shall reprimand him. You see, the Mounted likes its prisoners brought in alive; and it's a black mark against a man when he shoots to kill instead of capturing his man. And this case, of course, is—er—complicated by peculiar circumstances."

"Yes!" answered Nancy simply, and turned quickly round as the door was flung violently open.

Jean Ladronne stood there with his face flushed, his eyes dancing with excitement. "Mademoiselle," he cried, "M'sieu' Hardacre ees coming up de trail."

The Inspector was on his feet like a flash and before Nancy could speak shot his question sharply:

"Alone, Jean?"

"Oui, m'sieu'! All by heemself."

The Inspector flashed a look at Nancy, and saw a light of dismay in her eyes. "He has failed!" she said in a half-whisper. "Gaston Jer——"

"No," broke in the Inspector, "he has not failed or he would not have returned so soon."

"Then——" she began shudderingly.

"Yes," answered Carne to the unspoken question, "that is likelier. When the deep passions of men are involved and break loose——"

He checked himself as Nancy quite suddenly buried her face in her hands ; and after watching her for a moment with eyes that were full of compassion, he turned and quietly left the cabin. Making his way to the open gate of the stockade, he steered down the frozen river way. Three hundred yards away he saw Clem Hardacre and his team, racing towards the post, with the burly figure of Jean Ladronne running to meet him. He saw the meeting and his own impulse was to go down the trail to meet his friend, but he checked it, and stood waiting with a hard set look on his face, until the team swept up the bank, and Hardacre himself hurried towards him, leaving Jean by the sled.

" Well ? " he snapped in a tone that was wholly official.

" I got him," said Clem as laconically.

" Then where is he ? " asked Carne in the same curt tone.

" On the sled there," was the reply given with a jerk of the head backward.

Inspector Carne looked towards the sled and saw the ominous-looking shape swathed in blankets and understood or thought he did.

" You shot him ? " he asked sharply.

Hardacre touched his wounded shoulder. " No," he said, " he shot me ! "

There was a subtle change in Carne's intonation as he asked his monosyllabic question, and a certain softening of the hard lines on his face as he waited for the answer.

"I followed him, and met an Indian who had been to tell him of the failure of the attack here; and who whilst I slept went to warn him. But in his flight he made a mistake and turned into the big barren at the back of the hills behind these woods. Then I knew that it was a mere matter of time before I got him; for the further I drove him into the barren the smaller grew his chance of making the border. I suppose he knew that too, for when I gave him an opportunity he potted me in the shoulder; and I guess he thought I was done in, for he never came back to see, which was a bad mistake on his part. A few minutes later on I could have had him easily. I had my rifle trained on him and he didn't know it. A touch of the trigger—and accounts would have been squared between us for good. But I remembered—things, and put up my gun, swearing to myself that I would take him alive."

"Thank Heaven!" whispered Carne under his breath, and whilst he glanced at the ominous shape on the sled, asked aloud: "But he is dead?"

"Yes! We ran into a storm, and you know what winter storms are out in the barren lands. Carne, I found shelter of sorts and he didn't; and when the storm was over I found him frozen stiff."

"The hand of God, or so Father Grouard would say," commented the Inspector; then asked: "Why did you bring him along?"

"Because there being powerful reasons why you should, I didn't want you to doubt my word, Carne!"

"I shouldn't have done that, Clem, you know, if——"

"It wasn't you only I was thinking of, Carne, I didn't want there to be room for any mistake or misapprehension or suspicion about this business. There was Nancy and myself to think of, and——"

"By Jove!" cried Inspector Carne. "That little girl is waiting—torturing herself, I'll swear. Wait there, Clem, till I come back. I won't be a jiffy."

He ran to the cabin and entered. As he did so Nancy lifted a white face, and looked at him with appealing eyes.

"He has failed?" she asked quickly.

"No! Clem Hardacre is not in that line of business."

"Then——" The word came gaspingly, and the girl was unable to proceed.

"He has brought Gaston Jervaux with him—dead!"

"Oh!" she sobbed. "He killed him after all!"

"No!" he answered. "Heaven took that job off his hands; and though Jervaux shot Clem in the shoulder, Clem held his fire, determined to take the scoundrel alive. They drove into a big barren and were overtaken by a blizzard and Gaston Jervaux died of cold."

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" whispered the girl sobbingly.

"Clem didn't want any misunderstandings; you and I can easily guess why, and so he brought Jervaux's body along with him, in proof of his story."

"I would have believed him——" began Nancy earnestly.

"And so would I!" said Carne with a short laugh. "But it is better so! I shall take a look at Jervaux; I expect Hardacre will insist on that; and then in all the years to come you and I will never doubt, as perhaps we might have been tempted to do, when——"

"I should not!" cried the girl. "Never, till the end of time!"

"No," answered Carne gently. "I don't believe you ever would have done."

He turned and left the cabin, and Nancy waited, her heart beating wildly. There came the sound of feet crunching the frozen snow outside the cabin, a sharp rap on the door, a tug at the latch-string, and then the door opened and her lover entered. She stood with the glow of the stove lighting her worn face and showing the blood racing in her cheeks, whilst her eyes were like jewels in their brightness. He halted as he closed the door and stood regarding her for a moment, then he spoke in a shaking voice:

"My dear!"

"Yes?" she inquired tremulously.

"It is——'Journeys end'?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes!" she answered without hesitation.

"Yes!" and went to his arms, for

"Journeys end is in lovers' meeting,
As every wise man's son doth know."

* * * *

Five months later, Clem Hardacre was in San Francisco again on the terrace of Jacob Carlowe's house with its view of the Golden Gate. Carlowe himself was asleep in the wheeled chair to which that stroke of paralysis in the frozen North had more or less permanently condemned him; but Nancy was there also, and it was Nancy whom Hardacre had crossed the continent to see.

"I am in your hands, my dear! The Inspectorship is mine with seniority dating three years back. I can take it or leave it, and—well, the money is a negligible thing. It is the work, and the man's life that calls me!"

"And self-pride!" added Nancy with a little laugh.

"That too! I won't deny it. It's good to know that men hold one in respect."

"Yes!" she whispered with a side glance at the sleeping man in the wheeled chair. "And you want to go?"

"Naturally. It's a man's job; and I was not born to be an idler. But if you prefer we can go to England and I can set up as one of my country's legislators. My father would like that almost as much as the other way."

Nancy laughed suddenly. "I shouldn't," she answered. "You to become a man of mere words! No! You are not in that picture, my dear. I would sooner live in exile in Regina and have you do your proper work."

He looked across the city, towards the blue bay with not a ripple on its wide expanse, and let his

eyes rest on Tamalpais golden in the sunlight ; and his voice shook a little as he replied : " Regina is not 'Frisco ! You must understand that——"

She laughed again. " One might think you wished me to stay here, as Captain Wenslowe desired me to do——"

" Wenslowe ? "

" Yes ! He has left the service ! He is here. He asked me to marry him—a week ago. Naturally I refused."

" And you think you could endure Regina ? "

" I could endure Regina better than I could endure to see my man waste his life ! " she answered with a little emotion.

" I shall be away a good deal," he said, still putting the worst of his case, and then added the saving clause—" If I go."

" If you go ! " she said. " If you go ? If you don't go, Clem Hardacre, I shall never marry you, never ! So there ! "

And at that he took her in his arms ; and presently he said : " Jean Ladronne——"

" What of Jean ? " she asked quickly.

" Is training at Regina. I have a promise that he shall be sent to my district."

" It was arranged then ? " she inquired, a glint of laughter in her blue eyes.

" Yes ! " he admitted brazenly. " I was sure what your decision would be."

" But if I had refused ? " she asked quickly.

" Then," he said with laughter, " Jean would have had to desert ; as I should have had to do

also! But I knew you better than that, my dear, and so did Jean, and so we anticipated your decision, in that and in another thing."

"Another thing!"

"Yes! I have persuaded Father Grouard to make a trip south, and . . . and . . ."

"Oh!" she cried between gladness and surprise, then she whispered: "He is . . . to . . . to . . . marry us?"

"Yes! my dear! And Carne is to be best man, I could think of no better!"

"But I can," she whispered back, "and so can Inspector Carne."

And then she laughed with happiness that, like the golden head of Tamalpais, was without a cloud.

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